

Self-Care When Your Child Has Been DX with Cancer by a Cancer Parent

Stress is a part of life and we need it. It keeps us alert. It motivates us to do our best. And it helps push us to solve problems that at first glance appear unsolvable. But, too much stress for too long has far-reaching consequences – both mental and physical. Check it out on-line if you don't believe me. I recall first hearing about the toll continued stress takes on a body during a stress management class. After years of being a care-giver, I was amazed that I was still alive.

Beginning to understand how you can cope with the extreme stress brought on by a childhood cancer diagnosis will aid you and your child in the long run. You need to care for yourself in order to care for your child. Period. Sounds simple but can prove to be extremely challenging when you need to be in three places at the same time. How can you ever squeeze out time for yourself? How can you dare to be so selfish? Realize that it is not selfish but rather self-care. In the beginning you cannot fathom leaving your child's bedside. You cannot ask for help when you don't even know yet what you need. You can run on stress and/or coffee for quite a long time. But eventually it will get you. Be proactive from the start in small small small ways and you can avoid a big big big crash later.

Not only will you be healthier, you will be more available for your child.

With a cursory search of the internet on stress management and self-care techniques, I found a list that would get you through that rush hour traffic jam or thinking those negative thoughts about your neighbor but sounded silly when faced with the level of stress brought on by hearing that your child has a life-threatening illness. The concepts were solid but the carry-through was for stress-light. This is heavy duty stress. Below is an adapted list to better reflect the reality that parents' deal with and how they can realistically take care of themselves.

TRY TO RELAX: You are sleep deprived. You are dealing with life/death issues. Your child doesn't feel well and they mainly take it out on you. But try to relax anyway. For a brief moment, close your eyes, breathe in deeply (we do not realize how shallow our breathing becomes), and envision the word strength. Do this as many times a day as you can remember to.

PRACTICE ACCEPTANCE: Accept that no matter how much you wish you would wake up to discover this is a bad dream, it is not. It is real. And your child needs you. This takes a while so be patient with yourself as you cry out in the night that you want to return to a time before your child was diagnosed. Accept also that what you are going through is extremely difficult – even when you cannot get anyone else to understand just how difficult it is (except, of course, other childhood cancer parents).

TALK RATIONALLY TO YOURSELF: You are faced with so much that is out of your control. You may have skill in asserting yourself or you may need to learn how to. Being assertive and being aggressive are not the same. Assertion is standing up for yourself and your child. Aggression is lashing out from pain and frustration. Both may get results but the latter can leave scars and more pain. When you are faced with a difficult situation ~ your child has been poked 4 times and they still cannot find a vein to start an IV ~ know when it is okay to rationally and calmly ask that your child be given a break and that a new tech be sent in. Your emotions will be high – how can they not be? But try to relax – see first suggestion – and then advocate for your child from strength rather than pain and frustration.

GET ORGANIZED: Use a notebook to record questions for the medical staff. Use a day planner to record schedules. Keep records of test results and medications. There are many tools and we can help get them into your hands. There is an on-line app available called iCANCer – see link on family and teen page – at www.acco.org/inlandnw

EXERCISE: Try to fit in at least one walk a day - even if it is just through the hospital parking garage. You will feel better. If you can do more – do it. Days in the hospital are long and can be very taxing. Exercise can also help you keep a clear head. It will give you time to process and to think rationally – you are being confronted with a lot of information. Your skill level with assertion will increase as you face the difficult times that will come.

DISARM YOURSELF: It is natural to want to lash out at someone/anyone who appears to be creating even more stress in your life: the scheduler at the desk, the lab tech, the doctor, the nurse, the x-ray tech, the grocery store clerk, the insurance person, etc. Sometimes mistakes are made. People are human. Deal with these situations from assertion not aggression. When appropriate, go up the chain of command rather than cast blame where it may not be warranted. And if it is warranted, this can help to deal with it effectively so that it does not ever happen again.

QUIET TIME: Sometimes this means going in to the bathroom and locking the door for ten minutes. While you are in there you can run in place and get your exercise too. You need to recharge yourself and keep yourself healthy. The last thing you need is to get sick and be unable to be around your child's compromised immune system.

KEEP (or develop) YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR: Laughter is a great de-stressor. Humor can help you to remember that you are still the same family as before even though your life has been forever altered. It is okay to still have fun. Although you would not have chosen this, you can choose how to deal with it. One of my teenage cancer friends used to put her apple juice in a urine specimen cup (clean of course) and wait for a doctor or nurse to walk in before drinking it.

TALK WITH OTHER PARENTS WHO UNDERSTAND: Reach out: at the hospital, at events for families, on the telephone, on-line. Where ever you can find an ear, don't be afraid to utilize it. The day may come when you will be that ear for someone else. As you learn to care for yourself, you will learn to let others nurture and care for you. Those who know how to give to others also had to learn the hard lesson of learning to accept help from others. Human interaction, communication, and community are crucial to self-care. One last observation: On-line support is great but it has its limits and should not replace the living presence of another.