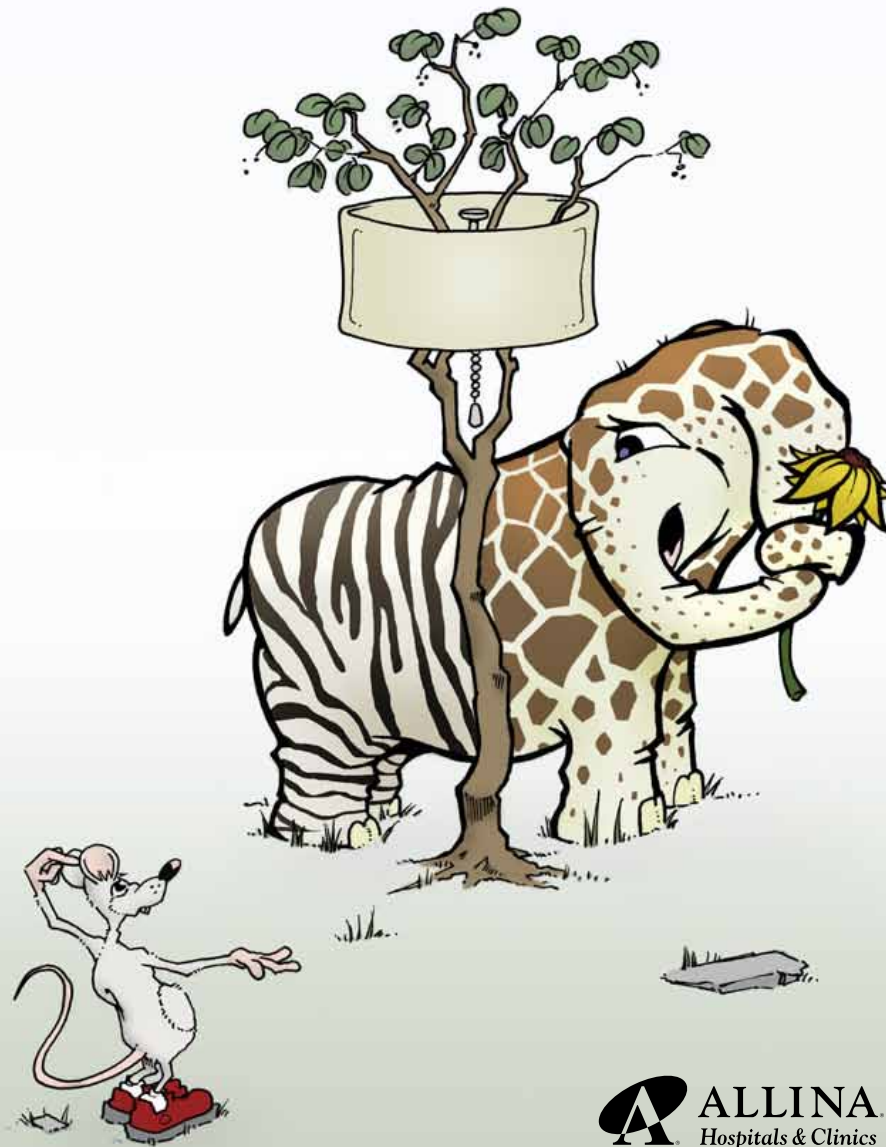


Facing Uncertainties



Facing Uncertainties

14 – 17 Years

Developmental Factors

Separation, Identity and Devotion to Friends and Causes

This is the age when your teen begins to act as an independent person and seeks his own identity as an individual and a sexual being. It is a time of struggle with social interactions and moral issues. Teens may withdraw from responsibilities and family interactions in favor of being alone or as a way of “putting ones foot down.” They are restless, and seek to separate themselves from family. Adolescents tend to be idealistic and readily substitute ideals for experience. They are devoted to friends and causes. Mastery of a skill is crucial to their self esteem and identity.

While this is a time when adolescents try to distance themselves from family, it is also a time when limits and the reliability of family are important. A seriously ill parent compounds this dilemma. They are torn by their desire to be at home and to be helpful, while being drawn to break away. The result can be increased confusion and inner turmoil.

“Me-centeredness” is commonplace. Teens may express anger at the illness and the changes and uncertainties it causes. Above all, adolescents want to feel like they belong, while needing to have their own identities. They may try out a variety of identities in search of their own, including sexual identity and relationships.

Cancer, and its uncertainties, may force a child to become independent earlier than normal, to regress and remain dependent, or to rebel and find a place to belong away from family.



What to Say

- Even if your adolescent does not seem to be listening, what you say is important.
- Talk from your heart and let your teen know you understand that the cancer and the changes it creates are hard to accept.
- Explain in detail what is happening now and what could happen in the future. Reinforce that you will continue to be truthful.

- Allow your teen to express his feelings, and remember that anger is usually the outward expression of sadness and fear.
- Ask your teen open-ended questions about what she is thinking and feeling.
- If talking becomes difficult, utilize other forms of communication to express yourselves, such as notes, letters and e-mails.
- Identify at least one other adult family member, school teacher, neighbor or friend your child can talk with and who will spend time with him away from the uncertainties of home. You may ask one or several people to support him in these ways.
- If death is a real possibility, talk about it as early as possible with your teen. Ask her what she understands and feels about death and dying. Let her tell you what he is struggling with most about your death. Share your fears and sadness with each other, and hold each other through that time. Explore ways in which you may create some meaningful times together. Exchange regrets and forgiveness, if necessary. Reaffirm your plans for who will care for her and her siblings. The *Ideas and Resources* section offers a variety of sources to help you talk with your teen about death.

What to Do

- Search for ways to make the times you have with your teen count.
- Do what gives you energy, not what drains your energy.
- Continue to set limits for your teen; but once in awhile make an exception.
- Dig out old photo albums, so you can relive memories of good times, including stories of his childhood and yours.
- Allow your teen to help you and the family. Be clear about the limits of your expectations to avoid resentments. Thank her for her efforts.
- Make time to enjoy relaxing, everyday activities together, such as playing games, watching TV and movies, listening to music and making things together.



- Drop little personal notes in your child's lunch bag or backpack to let him know you are interested in him and his activities.

What to Observe

Changes in behavior for children, adolescents and adults during stressful times are normal. These changes may include regression or returning to less mature behaviors. This age group typically demonstrates a wild mix of emotions and challenges. Stay tuned in to your child's demeanor, behavior and feelings. It may seem that nothing is normal. Some of the behavioral changes you should look for include:

- Extreme anger or aggression
- Withdrawal / isolation
- Depression
- Eating too much or too little
- Apathy
- Failing grades and behavioral problems in school
- Friends pulling away or your child pulling away from friends
- Addictive or risky behaviors
- Sleeplessness or too much sleep

It is important to pay attention to any behavior that is out of character for your child, especially if the behavior appears more intense or frequent, or if you intuitively sense that something is wrong. This is the time to consult a professional such as your physician or pediatrician, a child development specialist, or counselor.

