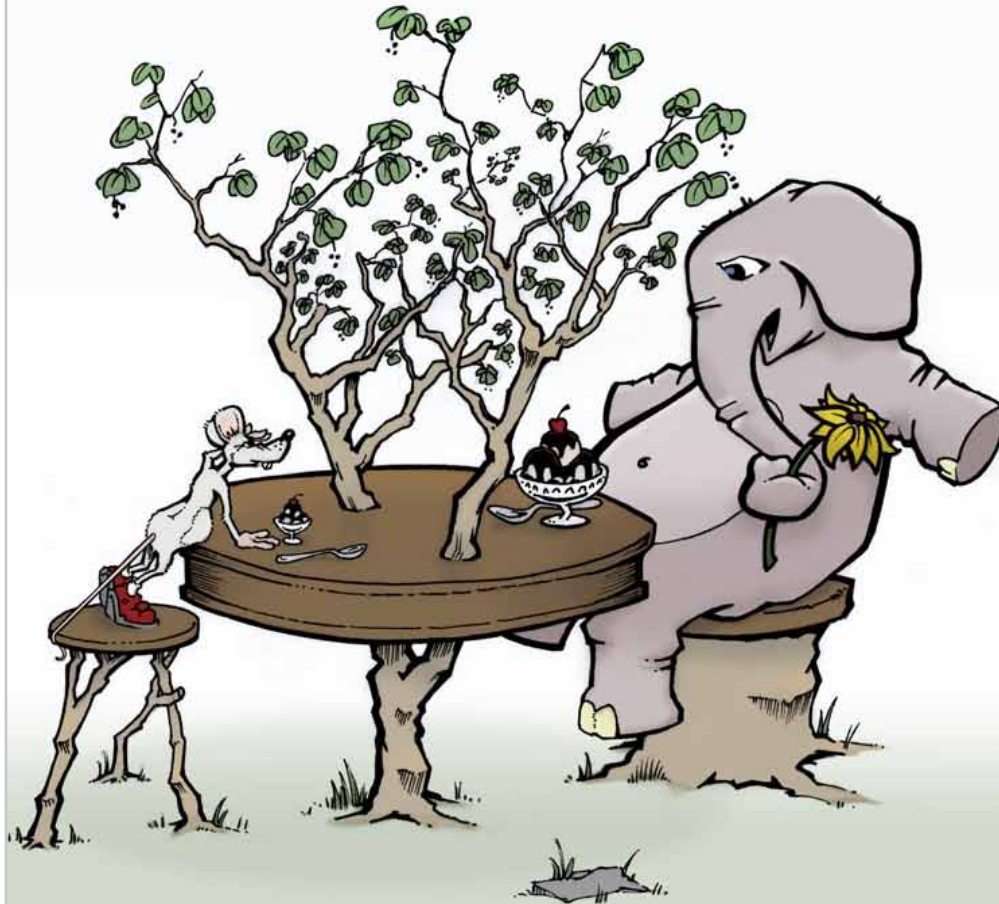


# Special Circumstances

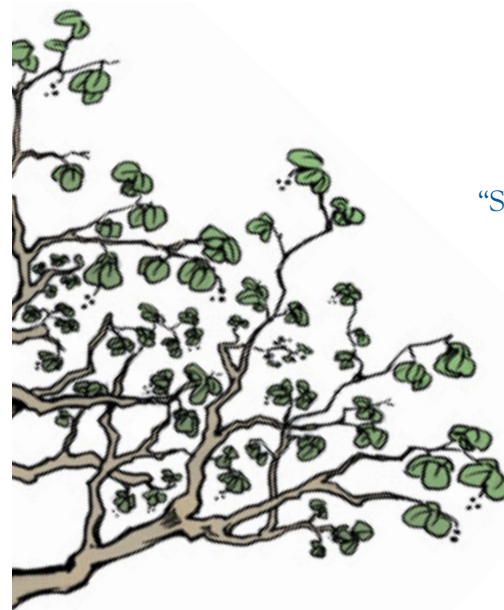


## Special Circumstances

The challenges a family was dealing with prior to the diagnosis of cancer typically remain, often making it even more difficult to cope with a cancer diagnosis. Unfortunately, the original challenges may even worsen during this new crisis. For some families dealing with difficult situations, the added crisis draws family members closer together. This section will address some of the more challenging special situations, including:

- Children and family members with special needs
- Single-parenting through cancer
- Death and non-death losses

These circumstances have to be worked around and through. Often it may feel like there are too many obstacles in your path. This section may give you some ideas for how to overcome the obstacles and succeed in facing their challenges.



“Sometimes you cannot see the forest  
for the trees.”  
~ *Anonymous*

## Keep in Mind

Life is not fair.

You cannot always change circumstances, but you can change your response to them.

Putting yourself first is not selfish, but a means to caring for others.

In other words, “put your own oxygen mask on first.”

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

People who depend on you can be helped to transfer their dependence to others, and sometimes learn to do some things for themselves.

You have power and choices even in difficult circumstances.

The best way out is always through – face the “elephant in the room” directly.

Naming problems can be the first step to making them more manageable, especially the difficult ones.

Try to focus less on the stress and more on finding meaning and purpose in your life.

Some people drain energy and can be toxic to the healing process. Spend time with the people who give you energy.

When you are in a hole, stop digging.

Sometimes lowering your standards can be healthy.



## Special Circumstances

### Children and Family Members with Specialized Needs

You may be coping with a child or another adult in your home or family circle with special needs or circumstances. These situations can make focusing on your own illness and communicating your needs more challenging.

If you live with a child or adult with a mental or physical illness, you have already learned about loss and grief, and the courage it takes to cope. You already know that life is not fair. Yet, you have found ways to work around the obstacles and adapt your life to change. You have grown in the knowledge of what is truly important in your life and what is not. You have probably learned that there are silver linings in dark clouds. But no matter what you think you already know, a crisis like cancer can threaten the balance in your family.

You may be worrying about a close family member, maybe an aging or ill parent. This also adds to your stress level. You cannot always be there and you worry that you may not be there in the future. Ultimately, it makes putting your needs first an almost insurmountable task.

The ways you coped in the past will help determine how you cope now, what your children can expect and what you can expect from them. We know that past coping skills help strengthen us against new stressors. If you have coped poorly with challenges in the past, now is the time to seek the help you need to face your new trials successfully. If you can look back and see some of the strength you called upon before, it will be there again.

If you are like most caregivers, your first thought is about the impact your cancer will have on the person whose needs you look after. It can send a wave of panic through you. How will my loved one get the care he/she needs if I am sick? How can I deal with my own cancer and the treatment, and still care for my children and family?

And your loved ones are worrying about you, even if they do not show it.

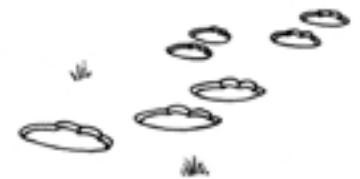


## Suggestions

- Put your own oxygen mask on first. You need to have enough personal strength to help someone else.
- Allow yourself time alone (or with a good friend) to think your circumstances through and identify what you are feeling.
- Recall the skills you learned through caring for others. The courage and power that helped you through the tough times before will help you through it again.
- If your goal has been to empower the loved one who is mentally and/or physically impaired, your illness may hasten you toward your goal.
- Identify other caregivers who can give you a break.
- Do not underestimate the understanding and need for involvement of the person who has some limitations. He/she most likely senses what is going on and wants to be included in discussions and activities, even if the words are not fully comprehended.
- Do not lose sight of those in your family who are healthy. While it may be harder to recognize, they need your attention, too.
- Keep everyone in the family informed, so they know how to help you. Use the CaringBridge web site ([CaringBridge.org](http://CaringBridge.org)) or other Internet sites to keep family members and friends updated. See the *Ideas and Resources* section for more sites.
- If you attend support groups related to your special circumstances, continue attending and make use of the groups' resources. If you do not currently attend a support group, consider attending one. Then make use of a sponsor, mentor or buddy you can call.
- Make a list of the friends who give you energy, as well as those whose energy-sapping traits you should avoid.



- Recognize the things that bring you peace, calm you and reduce your stress level, and incorporate more of them more often into your life. Take hold of those things that restore your energy and perspective, such as music, nature, art, books, movies, fishing, gardening, etc.
- Learn to recognize when your stress is increasing and ask for help before it shows up in unwanted forms.
- Seek community-based or personal options for respite care for your child or loved one, and make use of them.
- Maintain a journal in which you can detail your frustrations and fears, as well as the joys of life for which you are grateful.
- Scream in places where no one hears you – in the car, in the woods, or in places where it is already too noisy, such as at athletic events.
- Find legal counsel if you need to think ahead about where and how your loved one will be cared for.
- Increase the activities that you and your loved one like to do together, the things that bring both of you joy.
- Accept what you cannot change.



## Special Circumstances

### Single-Parenting through Cancer

“If I don’t put effort toward creating what I want,  
I have to put effort toward coping with what I get.”

~ Unknown

How and when you became a single parent may impact the ways in which you and your children cope with your illness. If a child is accustomed to the parenting arrangement he has, it will make it a little easier to integrate the new reality of your illness. A recent divorce or death will likely complicate the challenges facing you and your children.

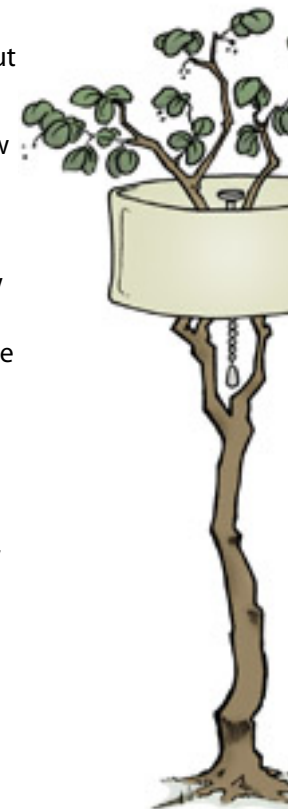
Because you and your spouse are no longer together, your children may worry even more about losing you to cancer. Their concern is very real and they will need your reassurance. You can tell them that you will do all you can to stay with them, but if circumstances change, you will tell them.

The ways you coped in the past will set the course for how you cope now and what your children can expect. This will still be a crisis for all of you, but we know that past coping experiences help strengthen us for new stressors. If you have coped poorly with challenges in the past, now is the time to seek the help you need to face your new trials successfully. If you can look back and see some of the strength you called upon before, it will be there again.

Though you may have talked with your children about your cancer from the very start, it is important to take as much time as needed to fully discuss your diagnosis and treatment with them. Before you begin these discussions, sort out your feelings with someone you trust and consider having that person present when you talk with your children.

Take time to catch your breath and think through all that you want to say. You do not need to say everything at once. Try not to minimize this additional stress. The elephant is in the room and it needs to be discussed.

Do not be afraid or embarrassed to let your children see your emotions. Allow your feelings to surface; even name them,



“Mom/Dad is sad right now, but that is a feeling we all have. And it will come and go.” Try to regain some control over your emotions, so that your children know it is good to let the sadness out, but that it does come and go. Reassure your children that they will be well cared for.

While most people who are single were single prior to their cancer diagnosis, sometimes the diagnosis contributed to you or your spouse leaving. Your children sense this and may be conflicted about their loyalty to you and their absent father or mother. It is important to not blame your spouse in front of your children. They likely know already, but the absent spouse remains their father or mother, and their relationship with that person will always be important and perhaps more important now.

### Suggestions

In addition to the age-specific suggestions in the earlier pages of this book, here are some general suggestions for single-parenting:

- Consider having a close friend or family member present when you break the news of your cancer diagnosis to your children.
- Be prepared to answer clearly and thoroughly the important question about who will take care of them if or when you are too sick.
- Let your children know that you understand they are afraid to lose you.
- If your spouse died, your children will naturally worry more about you dying, and will need you to tell them all that you know and what it will mean for them. Remember you are not dying, you are living until you die.
- If you have a shared custody arrangement or have a relationship with someone who provides your child care, talk to that person about your needs and your children’s needs for additional support during this time.



- If you know the cancer will require aggressive treatment, it will be important that you make arrangements with others, such as school counselors, ministers, therapists or family members, to offer your children a shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen.
- In addition to school and community support, identify one person – a close friend or family member – who can serve as a trusted confidant to your child.
- Strive to keep your children’s routines as consistent and stable as possible.
- Ask your children to help in ways that make them feel valued and appreciated.
- Be gentle to yourself and your children. Accept that you may not be able to do all that you could before.
- Seek counseling for yourself to gain additional support and understanding, and to process your emotions with minimal exposure to your children.
- Treat yourself to alone time.
- Think “outside the box” for creative solutions to your situation.
- Talk with hospital and clinic social workers for assistance with financial and other practical day-to-day issues.
- Pay attention to feelings of being overwhelmed. And do not hesitate to ASK FOR HELP!

As mentioned previously, watch your child for signs of difficulty in coping with the changes. Ask for and seek help for yourself and your children if the signs are uncharacteristic and persistent. Your stress level is higher, so be careful not to misinterpret what has been normal behavior for your child in the past.



## Special Circumstances

### Losses: Death and Non-Death Losses

There are many kinds of losses – some small and some large. Some represent the physical loss of a loved one while others are characterized by the loss of dreams. (See the booklet, *Loss of Dreams* in the *Ideas and Resources* section.) These become more evident to us when a cancer diagnosis is made.

For you, and for your children, a cancer diagnosis conjures the memory of a loved one who died from cancer or even from another cause. There are all the dreams and imagined losses your children will anticipate, “Will you be there to see my soccer championship, when I graduate, when I get married, or when I have children?”

As a cancer patient who has already experienced the death of a parent, sibling, friend or loved one, your fears and the fears of your children are even more real, especially if the death was cancer-related.

“He that conceals his grief finds no remedy for it.”

~ Turkish Proverb

Loss of any kind must be grieved, by you and by your children. Each of us grieves differently. Some losses, such as the death of a loved one, are more profound, creating a seemingly impossible void. Others, such as the loss of a job, an income, a friend or a home, may appear less overwhelming, yet their impact may be every bit as far reaching. A cancer diagnosis creates its own array of personal losses, including the loss of energy, anonymity, hair or a part of one’s body. Sometimes the diagnosis can trigger a job loss or the loss of friends who unexpectedly disappear from your life. Dreams, plans and pictures of the way you imagined life to be may be lost. Your children, like you, will feel these losses. And when they multiply, as they can with cancer, they need to be expressed and addressed.

“Grief is itself a medicine”

~ William Cowpers



When you feel a loss, it is essential to grieve its passing. Unfortunately, there is not always a fast or direct route through the grieving process. It affects us emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Take the time to learn about grief, its stages and pathways. See the *Ideas and Resources* section.

Find someone with whom you can share your loss and the feelings it creates. Naming your grief allows you and your children to better manage it. Anger, sadness and despondency are common. You may return to these feelings several times. During the process you will experience and express a host of difficult and painful emotions. Postponing or trying to stuff them will only prolong and intensify the feelings. They will simply resurface at another and perhaps less appropriate time.

Use the following steps and the resources in the back of this book to help you and your children grieve your losses. Grief is never a neat and easy process; it comes and goes. Over time, the energy it requires will lessen and life will begin to find its way to a new kind of normal.

### Suggestions

- Tell each other your real and imagined losses, all of them – from the biggest and worst to the smallest and silliest.
- Name the feelings you are experiencing as a result of your losses.
- Find ways to set free your grief and its emotions, such as sadness, fear, anger and confusion.
- Be patient because grieving is a process and takes time.
- Remember that no two children or adults grieve in the same ways.
- Connect with others, including friends, support groups, counselors and clergy. Be willing to share your feelings, no matter how painful. Openness and honesty are vital.
- Begin to dream and hope while you are grieving.



- Identify things you and your children can hope for together. Write your hopes on a list and keep adding to it over time.
- If grief leaves you feeling deeply depressed and it does not improve with time, talk to a good therapist.

“Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

~ George Bernard Shaw