

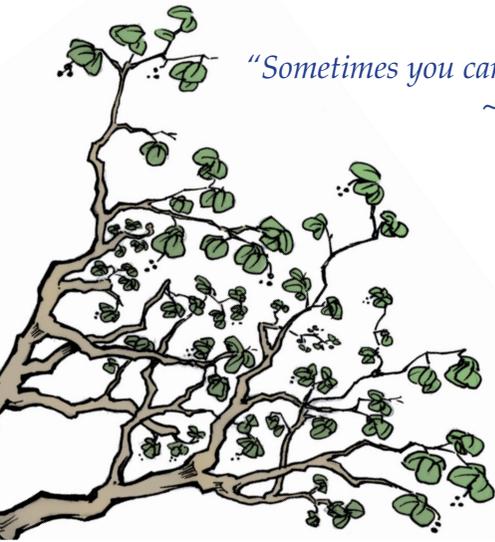
## Special Circumstances

The challenges a family was dealing with before the diagnosis of cancer usually don't go away. This can make it even harder to cope with a cancer diagnosis. Unfortunately, the original challenges may even get worse 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 through. 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 cancer and communicating your needs harder.

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 or 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. It makes putting your needs first almost impossible.

The ways you coped in the past will help decide how you will cope now, what your child can expect and what you can expect from him or her. Hard situations you coped with in the past will help to strengthen you for the new stressors in your life.

If you have coped poorly with challenges in the past, now is the time to seek the help you need to face these new challenges 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 to look after. It can send a wave of panic through you. How will my loved one get the care he or she needs if I am sick? How can I deal with my own cancer and the treatment and still care for my family?

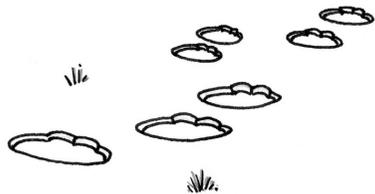
And your loved ones are worrying about you, even if they don't show it.

## Suggestions

- Put your own oxygen mask on first. You need to have enough strength to help someone else.
- Allow yourself time alone (or with a good friend) to think your situation through and notice how 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 to live independently, your illness may cause you to focus more on reaching that goal.
- Identify other caregivers who can give you a break.
- Try to involve the person who has limitations in your conversations and activities. He or she most likely senses what is going on and wants to be a part of it even if the words are not fully understood.
- Don't 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 website ([caringbridge.org](http://caringbridge.org)) or other Internet sites to keep family members and friends updated. See the *Ideas and Resources* section for more websites.



- If you attend support groups related to your special circumstances, continue going to the meetings and make use of the groups' resources. If you don't currently attend a support group, look into joining 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 who drain your energy. Try to avoid or limit time with those who drain your energy during this time.
- Recognize the things that bring you peace, calm you and reduce your stress level. Include more of them more often into your life. Take hold of those things that give you energy, such as music, nature, art, books, movies, fishing or gardening.
- Learn to recognize when you are becoming more stressed and ask for help.
- Seek community-based or personal options for respite care for your child or loved one, and make use of them.
- Write down 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.

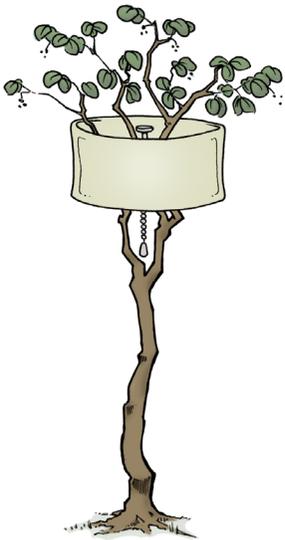


# Special Circumstances

## 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 cancer. If a child is used to the parenting arrangement he or she has, it will make it a little easier to adjust to the new reality of your cancer. A recent divorce or death will likely make it harder for your child to face the challenges of your cancer.



Because you and your partner are no longer together, your child may worry even more about losing you to cancer. Your child's concern is very real and he or she will need your reassurance.

The ways you coped in the past will set the course for how you cope now and what your child can expect. This will still be a crisis for all of you, but past coping experiences help strengthen you 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 these new challenges successfully. If you can look back and see some of the strength you called upon before, it most likely will be there again.

Though you may have talked with your child about your cancer from the very start, it is important to take as much time as needed to continue answering his or her questions. Before you begin these conversations, sort out your feelings with someone you trust. You may want to have that person present when you talk with your child. You don't need to say everything at once.

Don't be afraid or embarrassed to let your child see your emotions. Let your feelings show; even name them. For example, "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 child knows it is good to let the sadness out, but that it does come and go. Reassure your child that he or she will be well cared for.

While most people who are single were single before their cancer diagnosis, sometimes the diagnosis contributed to their partner leaving. Your child senses this and may be confused about their relationship with the absent parent. It is important to not blame your partner in front of your child. He or she likely knows already, but the absent parent is still his or her father or mother figure. Your child's relationship with that person will always be important and maybe even 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:

- You may want to have a close friend or family member with you when you break the news of your cancer diagnosis to your child.
- Be ready to answer clearly and thoroughly the important question about who will take care of your child if or when you are too sick.
- Let your child know that you understand if he or she is afraid to lose you.
- If your partner died, your child will naturally worry more about you dying. Your child will need you to tell him or her all that you know and what it will mean for him or her. 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 child's needs for more support during this time.
- If you know the cancer will involve difficult treatment, it will be important that you make arrangements with others, such as school counselors, ministers, therapists or family members, to offer your child a shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen.
- In addition to school and community support, find one person – a close, trusted family member or friend – your child can go to for support.
- Try to keep your child's routine as regular as possible.
- Ask your child to help in ways that make him or her feel valued and appreciated.
- Be gentle to yourself and your child. Accept that you may not be able to do all that you could before.
- Get counseling for yourself to get more support. This will help you to process your emotions.
- Treat yourself to alone time.
- Think "outside the box" for creative solutions to your situation.
- Talk with hospital and clinic social workers for help with financial and other practical day-to-day issues.
- Pay attention to feelings of being overwhelmed. And don't hesitate to ask for help!

As mentioned before, watch your child for signs of trouble with coping with the changes. Ask for and get help for yourself and your child if the signs are unusual and go on for awhile. 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 noticeable when a cancer diagnosis is made.

For you, and for your child, a cancer diagnosis may remind you of a loved one who died from cancer or even from another cause. There are all the dreams and imagined losses your child will expect, “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 child 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 your child. Everyone grieves differently. Some losses, such as the death of a loved one, are harder. You may feel it is impossible to fill the void. Others, such as the loss of a job, an income, a friend or a home, may seem less overwhelming, yet their impact may be every bit as challenging. A cancer diagnosis creates its own set of personal losses. This may include things such as the loss of energy, hair or a part of one’s body. Sometimes the diagnosis can cause 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 child, like you, will feel these losses. When these losses multiply, as they can with cancer, you will need to deal with them.

*“Grief is itself a medicine”  
~ Willaim Cowpers*

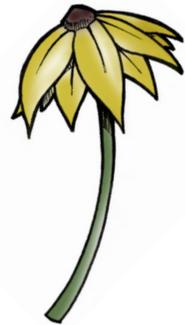
When you feel a loss, it is important to grieve its passing. Unfortunately, there is not always a fast or direct route through this process. It will affect you emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Take the time to learn about grief, its stages and pathways. See the *Ideas and Resources* section.

Find someone you can share your loss and the feelings it creates. Naming your grief allows you and your child to better manage it. Anger, sadness and feelings of hopelessness are common. You may return to these feelings several times. During the process you may experience and express many difficult and painful emotions. Postponing or trying to ignore them may only make the process harder. Your feelings may simply come back 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 child 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 having 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 child can hope for together.  
Make a list of your hopes and keep adding to it over time.
- If grief leaves you feeling deeply depressed and it does not improve with time, talk to a professional counselor.

*“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*

