
Thoughts on
Living with Cancer

**Being a Parent
with Cancer**



by Caren S. Fried, Ph.D.

My Personal Experience

In 1994, I was told those fateful words: “You have cancer.” At that time, I was 35 years old, a biologist, wife, and mother of a two year old. I was diagnosed with lung cancer, even though I had never smoked. My cancer treatments included two major lung surgeries (which resulted in the removal of my right lung), various standard and experimental aggressive chemotherapy treatments, and numerous alternative therapies. Despite all this, my cancer persisted. But so did I!

A turning point occurred for me when I decided to focus on my health instead of my illness. I believe that cancer is an illness of the body, mind, heart, and soul. Therefore, for me being healthy meant dealing with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues related to cancer as well as undergoing the physical treatments. In addition to the various conventional and alternative therapies which I pursued, writing became an important part of my own healing journey with cancer. To be able to express my emotions, thoughts, and beliefs in writing was critically important for my own overall health.

These pamphlets grew from the numerous notes that I wrote every day in my healing journal. The information that is available for newly diagnosed cancer patients can sometimes be overwhelming. It was my intention, therefore, to write short pamphlets concerning various topics that deal with the practical issues of living each day with cancer. I hope that these pamphlets will encourage discussion of topics that are often difficult yet necessary to deal with and to help cancer patients and their families make the numerous decisions that need to be made during this time.

Healing is a very personal issue and each person must find his/her own path to healing from cancer. To this day, I continue to focus on my health each day, to live a full active life as a mother and wife, and to pursue a new career as a writer despite cancer. It is my hope that these pamphlets will be useful for others seeking out a healing journey while living with cancer and beyond.

Caren S. Fried

Thoughts on --- *Living with Cancer*

Being a Parent with Cancer

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Being a Parent with Cancer

Discussing my cancer with my daughter was always difficult for me. Trying to answer her questions often proved to be as much a learning experience for me as it was for her. —C.F.

Cancer is an illness that affects the entire family. Your children will need to cope with your illness in their own way. The amount and type of information you give your children will depend on their age and ability to understand. Throughout your cancer experience, you will need to have ongoing discussions with your children as their age and needs change and as your medical situation changes.

It is an enormous challenge to be a parent while living with cancer. However, it is possible to turn this challenge into an opportunity to develop a deep relationship with your children and to instill new coping abilities within your children. While it is tempting to protect your children from the emotional pain caused by a cancer diagnosis, it will be much more valuable to your children to discuss your illness with them and to help them develop healthy coping strategies to deal with life's difficult experiences. You will be providing



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them with an invaluable ability that they will use throughout their life.

The following general guidelines are meant to help parents who are trying to raise their children while living with cancer.

Always be truthful to your children.

The amount of information you give your children may vary depending on their age and ability to understand, but you should never tell them something that is untrue. If you are dishonest in an effort to protect your children from the truth, they are likely to mistrust you later.

Tell children as much as they can understand.

Start with small amounts of information and allow them the opportunity to ask questions. Then you can give them more information. What and how much you tell them will depend on their age and coping abilities.

Keep the lines of communication open.

Let them know that they can ask you (or someone else) any questions. Have family meetings once a week or once a month. If it is too difficult for you to discuss your cancer with your children, find someone else who you and your children are comfortable with to be the one they can talk to.

Use the term “cancer” with your child.

Make sure that they realize that this is not like a cold, that it is not a contagious disease, and that there is no clear cause for your illness. Young children will often blame themselves or others for a parent’s serious illness. It is very important to make sure that they realize that neither they nor anyone else caused your illness.


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Provide your children with a sense of security.

Children need to feel that there will be someone to take care of them, even if mom or dad cannot. Let them know who will be taking care of them and when.

Discuss your hair loss.

If you lose your hair due to cancer treatments, do not try to hide your bald head from your children. This will only cause additional anxiety for both you and your children. Have your children participate in your treatment by allowing them to help you choose your wig, scarves, hats, etc. Discuss with them why your hair is falling out and that it will grow back after treatment.

Conserve your energy as much as possible.

Recognize that you may not be able to do everything you used to do and divide up your energy with your children in a way that is best for all of you. If you take them to the park in the morning, you may be too tired to spend the rest of the day with them and they will have to go to a friend’s house.

Don't compromise your own health for your children.

You must do what you need to do to recover from cancer first. You can make it up to your children at some other time in the future. They can wait. Your health cannot.

Get help for household chores.

Learn to ask for and accept help from others as much as possible. Whether it is mom or dad who has cancer, try to have someone else do household chores (such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, driving the kids to activi-


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ties, etc.). If you can afford to pay for housekeeping help, do so. If you have family and friends who want to help, give them specific chores to do. Perhaps a family member will help pay for hired help.

Read books.

Books are available for children who have a parent with cancer. There are books written for adults to help the parents deal with the issues children face when a parent is ill. There are also some books written for very young children. Depending on the child's age, you can read the books with them or give them the books to read by themselves if they prefer.

Look for support groups for children.

Call your local hospital and American Cancer Society to find out if there are support groups in your area for children of parents with cancer.

Take your children to the hospital and to your treatments if you can.

It is helpful for children to be able to see where you are going and what is happening to you. Children's imaginations are often far worse than reality.

Talk to other parents who have cancer.

Other parents who have been living with cancer can share their experiences and perhaps give you helpful hints. Look for support groups that have members who are also dealing with the issues of being a parent with cancer.

Do the best that you can do, but do not blame yourself if you feel that you made a mistake.

If you are concerned about how you handled a particular situation, you can always discuss it with your children and make up for it at a later time.

Consult a qualified child psychologist or social worker.

If your children are acting differently, this may be an indication that they are not dealing well with your cancer. Notice if they are not sleeping well, eating well, doing well in school, etc. They may become very irritable and nasty or quiet and withdrawn. It may be difficult to tell the difference between "normal" childhood development behavior and behavior which is a response to your illness. If you are unsure, consult a child psychologist or social worker, preferably one that has experience dealing with children of ill parents.

Summary

Raising children while dealing with your own life-threatening illness is an extremely difficult task. It is a challenge to be sure to meet your own needs while making sure that your children's needs are taken care of as well. Each child needs to deal with the serious illness of a parent in his/her own way. As a parent, you can be most helpful to your children by instilling within them the ability to develop their own coping skills.



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***Thoughts on Living with Cancer
Pamphlets***

Cancer as a Whole-Body Illness



How to Be an Active Participant in Your Own Recovery:
Guidelines for the Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patient.



Coping with Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy



Positive Thinking - Helpful or Harmful for Cancer Patients?



Suggestions for Friends and Relatives of the Cancer Patient



An Introduction to Alternative/Complementary Therapies for Cancer



Being a Parent with Cancer



Diagnosis Cancer: Why Me?



Healing and Dying



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