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# How to Cope When Your Child is Diagnosed with Cancer

No one is ever prepared to hear that their child has a life-threatening illness. For most parents the first few weeks are a blur. Parents have a lot to manage after a child is diagnosed with cancer and the first few weeks can be overwhelming. Here are some tips, suggestions, and resources to help parents cope during those first few weeks after diagnosis.

- [Common feelings and reactions when a child is diagnosed with cancer](#)
- [What can help parents cope with feelings and stress?](#)
- [Learning about treatment](#)
- [Creating a new normal](#)

## Common feelings and reactions when a child is diagnosed with cancer

**If your child has been diagnosed with cancer, there are no right or wrong feelings.** Some parents have trouble believing that this is happening. Others cry. Other parents focus on making treatment decisions. All of these reactions are normal. Some of the most common reactions to hearing a child has cancer are:

- Shock
- Disbelief and denial
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Depression

- Anger
- Overwhelmed

## What can help parents cope with feelings and stress?

- Using support from social workers, counselors, nurses, psychologists, and doctors.
- Leaning on family members or friends, talking with them or letting them help with household needs.
- Using or learning strategies to reduce anxiety or tension, such as exercising, listening to music, or keeping a journal.
- Finding strength in religious beliefs or spiritual practices and talking to pastors, rabbis, or other clergy.
- Openly discussing fear and anxiety with cancer treatment team members.

**Taking care of themselves: eating right, getting rest, and taking breaks.**

- Get to know the [people on your child's cancer care team](#)<sup>4</sup> and what they do on the cancer care team.
- Get a notebook to bring to all your child's appointments to take notes and write down questions before and after the visit.
- Ask a family member or friend to be there and take notes when you talk with health care professionals about treatments or how they are helping your child get better.
- Ask staff to repeat information or explain something in a new way if you do not understand.
- Take time to read through information the treatment team gives you in a quiet space.
- Ask for help in getting [second opinions](#)<sup>5</sup>.
- Ask the medical team to focus on teaching you what you need to know to care for your child at home. If your child is in the hospital, ask about classes for parents of children with cancer.
- If it is helpful, you can ask for copies of [test and lab results](#)<sup>6</sup>.
- Call the American Cancer Society or other reliable sources for more information about [diagnosis](#)<sup>7</sup> and [treatment](#)<sup>8</sup>.
- Read about your child's [type of cancer](#)<sup>9</sup>.

## Creating a new normal

In the first few weeks after a child's diagnosis, family schedules and routines get turned inside out. The first few weeks can feel like a movie of someone else's life. Part of what helps kids with cancer, their siblings, and other family members cope is finding ways to keep as many things the same as possible or creating new predictable routines around treatments schedules. It can take a little while to get through the initial shock and learning about your child's illness, but here are some things to think about and resources to help you keep or create routines while your child is getting treatment:

- Talk with your employer about what is happening quickly after diagnosis to find out what programs and resources are available to help you take time off or keep working during your child's treatment. There are different types of leave, including [Family Medical Leave](#)<sup>10</sup>, that may be available. You may also be able to work from home or from the hospital, depending on your job.
- If people in your community and family offer to help, think about things they can do to help that will help your family keep routines. They may be able to help drive siblings to school or to activities, with meals or in other ways to help keep your

household running as smoothly as possible. Consider asking a friend or family member to be the contact person for managing and coordinating offers to help.

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8. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types.html)
9. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types.html)
10. [www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/family-and-medical-leave-act.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/family-and-medical-leave-act.html)
11. [www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/after-treatment/returning-to-school.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/after-treatment/returning-to-school.html)

## References

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