



## DEMPSEY™ CENTER

### How to Support Teens When a Loved One Has Cancer

Talking with your adolescent about your own or a loved one's illness may be difficult, and many adults struggle with how to break the news and answer difficult questions. The natural instinct of parents to protect their children from the scary or difficult realities of cancer can make things harder and create a rift between you and your teenager. Providing open and honest information as early as possible will help your adolescent to feel respected, involved, and re-establishes the trust they need in you to navigate this time in their life. This will ultimately put you in a position of being their greatest ally while they test the waters of independence, self-care, and adulthood.

#### What your teen needs to know

Open and honest communication is the best course of action when speaking to children or adolescents of any age. Unlike small children, teenagers are able to understand complex ideas and information. In fact, most teens will seek out information privately and of their own accord with little guidance from adults. Sometimes the information they find, whether through the internet, friends, or in books, may not be appropriate for your situation and could contribute to unnecessary confusion, stress, and anxiety. It is important to include teenagers in family discussions and to offer them as much information as you can about your specific situation as well as how and where they can get more information. The most basic information that they will need to know is:

- The name of the cancer, such as "lymphoma" or "lung cancer"
- The part of the body where the cancer is located
- How it will be treated
- How their lives will change

*Extra Tip:* If you have younger children in your family, speak with your teenagers first and explain to them the information that might be too complex for the younger members to understand. Explain to them how you intend on talking about cancer to their siblings. Not only will this help your adolescent feel empowered and respected, but it acknowledges your teen's maturity and can help guide them in supporting their younger siblings.

#### Creating a balanced perspective

Cancer is a serious but not a hopeless illness. It is also a complex disease that can look different in each individual depending on type, course of treatment, stage, and other health factors. Often parents fear conversations with their children because of their own fears, concerns or questions about the disease. Offering information from a matter-of-fact perspective may help you to maintain objectivity. Try to avoid making promises that you can't keep.

*Extra Tip:* Cancer is ripe with uncertainty. If you try to wait to give information until you have all the answers, you may keep your children waiting too long and end up contributing more to their anxiety. It is OK to acknowledge what you do not know. You can always conclude with "This is what I know now, and when I get more information or if anything changes, I will tell you."

## **Creating a balanced expectation of your teen**

Teens are not typically identified as “caregivers” but often they play a huge role, even if it’s just an emotional one. Empowering them to be involved and included in appropriate caregiving tasks and household responsibilities has been proven to be a good thing; however, relying too heavily upon your teen can create more problems for all involved.

Additionally, teenagers are at an important juncture in their development and need independence just as much as they need nurturing and support. The best person to help teach your adolescent how to balance the pressures of caring for others and caring for themselves is you! Discuss together a way to create balance for your teen and keep the dialogue open.

*Extra Tip:* Teenagers are unpredictable and may react to the stress and uncertainty of a cancer diagnosis in many different ways. Many teenagers will turn to their friends for support more than anyone else. Encourage them to spend time with their friends in age-appropriate activities and try to preserve as much of their normal routine as possible.

## **When it’s time to seek help**

When a serious illness compounds the stress associated with adolescence your teen will cope the best way that they can. Some coping strategies may not be helpful and can function as a signal that your teen is struggling. You know your adolescent best and what is most important to observe are changes in personality and behavior which persist. Pay attention if your teenager begins to isolate or retract from his or her responsibilities, like work, school, afterschool activities, or friends. Your teen needs you to step in before they suffer emotional repercussion, fall behind, or fail.

The following behaviors require immediate attention:

- Decline in school
- Delinquency (or increase)
- Use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Suicidal or self harming threats/comments
- loaning or giving away his/her property
- Changes in behaviors and emotions that become pervasive
- Changes in eating and sleeping that do not go away

*Extra Tip:* Adolescents often respond to intense stress by avoiding and distracting from the cause of their suffering. Receiving cancer (or mental health) support naturally contradicts this desire and your adolescent may be fiercely opposed to seeking help. This may make your job as a parent very challenging as you sense their need for help but fear making it worse by pushing too hard. Partner with your teen to explore with you the support options that are available. Getting through the door is often the hardest part. Support is meant to feel good – if it’s the right fit for them, they will more than likely want to return.

For more information or to learn about programs that may help your teenager, please refer to the Youth and Family section of our website at [www.dempseycenter.org](http://www.dempseycenter.org)