

## GRAB THE TISSUES

Talking to your child about a loved one with a serious illness—whether it's a grandparent, a friend, or even you—feels impossible. This story won't make that easy, but it will help you feel prepared. Here's how to handle the conversation (and all those follow-up questions) with care.

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**GRANDPA HAD A STROKE.** Your sister needs surgery. Mommy has breast cancer. *Ugh.* When someone you love gets a bad diagnosis, the news is hard enough on adults. But breaking it to your kids? Where do you even begin? Besides the basics (when, where, how to start the conversation), there are the larger, looming concerns: How much is too much—or too little—to share? What if it affects my teen's schoolwork? Will my six-year-old have bad dreams? Won't the worry be too much for their sweet little hearts? It's enough to make anyone think, *Maybe I should just keep the news to myself.* Here's the thing about that, though: You can't.

"Kids know when something's up. They overhear things or see you whispering and fill in the blanks," says Robin Goodman, Ph.D., a psychologist and the executive director of A Caring Hand, a nonprofit in New York City that helps children and families deal with loss. "And the scary things they come up with are usually far worse than the truth." It's much better to teach kids strategies for how to manage the situation, building resilience now and

for the future. "Families that talk openly can shape kids' attitudes and can forge a path together," says Goodman. Consider the alternative: how terrifying that path is for kids left to wander it alone. (Hint: You're not the only one surfing the Web.) "Today children are so young when they turn to the Internet for answers, and there is so much unreliable information," says Paula Rauch, M.D., the director of Massachusetts General Hospital's Parenting at a Challenging Time Program and a coauthor of *Raising an Emotionally Healthy Child When a Parent Is Sick*. "They don't know what to make of it. Worse, you'll probably never know what they've learned." You want to deal with serious illness as a family unit. This is how to start.

## GROUND RULES

**Every situation is unique, but some overall guidelines apply to them all.**

### Deal with your own emotions first.

Talk things through with another adult—a good friend, a spouse, a therapist. "It's like putting the oxygen mask on yourself first," says Betsy Brown Braun, a child-development and behavior specialist and the author of *Just Tell Me What to Say*. "Kids soak up your anxiety."

**Pick your time carefully.** You want minimal distractions. Talk in the car or on a family hike, offering time for them to mull over the information and ask questions. A weekend or after school is probably best.

**Refer to the disease by its proper name.** "That is the beginning of everything," says Rauch. "It makes it 'talk-about-able' and concrete." You want to send the message that hard things can be discussed, not minimized.

**Be honest—within reason.** "You don't have to answer their questions with the total truth," says Goodman. "Approach it like anything else. Tailor explanations to what is appropriate for the child's age and your situation." This may mean skipping the specifics of chemotherapy side effects or what, exactly, is being removed during the surgery.

### Prepare for the Question of All Questions.

*Are you/is he...going to die?* "There is no one right answer, but I can tell you a wrong one," says Brown Braun.

"Don't say no unless you are 100 percent sure that's true. Instead, tell them what you can in as reassuring a manner as possible: 'Right now I have the best doctors, and we are doing everything possible to make my body well again. I'm planning to have many more years with you.'"

**Talk logistics.** Kids at every age are egocentric, says Goodman, so relate what you share to their everyday life. "I will need to get a blood test every Wednesday to ensure the medicine is working, so Aunt Jenny will get you to band practice on those days."



**Take it one conversation at a time.** If it seems like a lot, it is. But you don't have to accomplish everything at once.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN THE SICK LOVED ONE IS...

### A BELOVED ELDERLY RELATIVE

Declining health of grandparents (or great-aunts and great-uncles) can be painful, but it may also be the easiest situation for young minds to grasp, says Goodman. "Even young children often learn that older bodies don't work as well forever," she says.

**HOW TO BRING IT UP:** Chances are the kids have an idea that something is up, so don't dawdle. "A grandfather with a serious heart problem may not have the same engagement, causing kids to make assumptions, like 'He doesn't love me as much anymore,'" says Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., the author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. Acknowledging the change is your way in. "Say, 'I know it's hard that Grandpa hasn't been coming to your baseball games lately. Here's why,'" suggests Goodman. Remember that a wondrous tone can help little kids grasp the enormity. Says Mogel: "Tell them something like 'The heart has to pump 70 times a minute to circulate

blood, and Grandpa has been doing that for more than 80 years. How amazing is that? But now his heart is having a harder time.'"

### HOW TO HELP THEM

**COPE:** Give your kids a sense of agency, not helplessness, by treating them like health-care advocates, whether they're 4 or 14, says Mogel. Say, "We can't help Grandpa's heart, but how can we take his mind off of it?" Then make a plan together.

For a beach-loving grandpa, collect shells to bring him. Grandma loves purple? Pick out a soft violet blanket for her.

**AS THINGS GET WORSE:** When the inevitable is imminent, it's time to impart what can be an enormously comforting life skill: keeping a loved one's memory alive. Have kids write (or tell you) the top-10 things about Gramps, then



# LIVING WITH ALZHEIMER'S.

# SUPPORTING SOMEONE WITH ALZHEIMER'S.





illustrate it. Or try this: “There’s a Jewish tradition in which it’s your responsibility to identify a loved one’s special traits and carry them on in your own life,” says Mogel. If Grandma always surprised everyone with butterscotch candies, for instance, talk about how your daughter might start to give small, unexpected gifts to her own friends.

#### A CLASSMATE

It’s harder for kids to wrap their heads around someone their age battling a life-threatening or life-altering illness. This can also trigger fears about death.

**HOW TO BRING IT UP:** Without being voyeuristic, first learn as much as you can about the situation from a teacher or school friends. You could even consult a doctor to find out more about the disease. Then ask your child a few open-ended questions to suss out what she has heard, says Brown Braun. Chances are her schoolmates have been sharing all kinds of garbled misinformation. Lay out the real facts, reassuring her that it’s very unusual for kids to get sick. “Tell them it’s easy for a brain to get stuck on worry, and if they have any fears, the best thing they can do is talk about it,” says Laura Kastner, Ph.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Univer-

sity of Washington, in Seattle.

#### HOW TO HELP THEM

**COPE:** Robert Brooks, Ph.D., a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and a coauthor of *Raising Resilient Children*, suggests an old classic—making and sending a card, which is appropriate even if the kids don’t socialize outside the classroom. Children feel better being constructive, he says. Or ask the teacher if the class will do something; if she has no plans, volunteer to spearhead the project, like performing a song and sending a video. You’ll be helping to channel their anxiety and modeling how to support friends. If your child wants to visit at the hospital, check in first with the sick child’s family—and prepare your child for what she will see.

**AS THINGS GET WORSE:** Bring up the classmate periodically, but avoid what Kastner calls “emotional dumpster diving.”



She says, “Don’t pepper kids with questions. They build scar tissue from all the interviewing.” Instead, say something in a drive-by way, like “Oh, I saw Jeremy’s mom, and she said he did really well with his last

treatment. Isn’t that great?” This conversation starter lets you gauge your child’s emotional state without putting him in the hot seat. (“Did you talk about Jeremy at school? How are you feeling about it?”)

#### ANOTHER MOM OR DAD

When another parent gets sick, it—surprise—fuels your child’s fear that you could be next.

**HOW TO BRING IT UP:** Find out what the family has let their own children

#### WHEN IT’S PEANUT THE GUINEA PIG

**The demise of a family pet—cat or dog, goldfish or lizard—can bring profound heartbreak to a child. Which is one reason you should have a pet in the first place.**

**SAY WHAT?** Letting a child assist in the care of an infirm animal—and participate in its burial, if it comes to that—helps her learn crucial life skills in a less charged environment (one in which you will be there to comfort and teach her). This is excellent practice for future human situations. “The death of a pet is often where these hard lessons start,” says Evan Imber-Black.

**DO:** Cuddle up with your kid and *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, a classic book about all the wonderful things a family cat (and his death) offers. **DON’T:** Scout out an ailing hamster’s doppelgänger to swap in when the time comes. “Death is very rich if you don’t pretend it’s not happening,” says Wendy Mogel.

know and follow their lead. Your child shouldn’t know more or be asked to keep secrets, says Evan Imber-Black, Ph.D., the director of the Center for Families and Health at the Ackerman Institute for the Family, in New York City, and the author of *The Secret Life of Families*.

#### HOW TO HELP THEM

**COPE:** Get kids’ minds off their own fears and onto problem-solving. *How can you help your friends?* “This is a great opportunity to teach your kids about empathy and supporting community,” says Brown Braun. “Say, ‘I’m going to have Sam because his mom is going to be tired.’” Then talk about what the kids might do to lend support. Maybe they can make a batch of Sam’s favorite cookies to drop off, pick up gift certificates to a pizza place, or help

distract Sam by taking him to a movie. **AS THINGS GET WORSE:** “Kids go quickly from ‘It can happen to them’ to ‘It can happen to you,’” says Kastner. So give your child plenty of opportunities to express that fear. Reassure her that her parents’ bodies are fine. But even if she doesn’t express worry (older kids may be less likely to say something), you can slip reassurances into the conversation. Something like: “It’s not often that people our age get this disease, but it’s good to be extra careful, so Dad and I are both having checkups soon.”

#### A SIBLING

When one of your kids is sick, it can have a profound impact on the others. The healthy child might feel as if he has lost his parents, wrapped up as they are in their sick child’s treatment. **HOW TO BRING IT UP:** Don’t hold back. It is impossible not to be wholly affected by what is going on with a sibling. “And you don’t want one kid standing alone on the sidelines,” says Brown Braun. Include the well child in discussions and treatment as much as possible, so she will feel the support you are giving her sibling. Pay close attention to her concerns, though they might seem less urgent by comparison. The well child is probably thinking, *Am I going to get this?* But she doesn’t

want to bother you. “It’s up to you to help her ask, then assure her that it’s very, very unlikely,” says Brown Braun.

#### HOW TO HELP THEM

**COPE:** Even as you include the well child as much as possible day to day, try not to disrupt her normal activities. Before hospital visits, prepare older kids by describing the equipment that they can expect to see in the hospital room or at the chemotherapy treatment. Little ones may need easier, more fun ways to learn the scary stuff. So read them a picture book about a hospital or help them draw one of their own, says Imber-Black. Hospital visits don’t have to be bleak. Says Goodman, “If they love to play video games, ask him to pick out one that they can play together.” This can also help you set expectations. “Your brother

gets really tired, so let's bring just one game this time." Also, be sure both you and your spouse—or other close adults—schedule time to spend with the well child. If one of you can't get away from the hospital, develop a system where your child at home texts pictures of important school papers or artwork, then touch base with FaceTime calls.

**AS THINGS GET WORSE:** Acknowledge that it stinks for her that you are spending so much time on her sick brother, but make it clear that you would do the same for her. And go ahead and acknowledge that there are some things in the sick role that seem enviable, but there's a lot that isn't, says Rauch. Sure, her brother is lucky to be getting attention and toys. But he is also unlucky to have to take medicine that makes him throw up and be in the boring hospital. "Siblings struggle with feeling terribly guilty that their sibling got this but also a little bit glad it's not them," says Imber-Black. "This will show itself in a six-year-old who decides to swipe his brother's toys. You need to let them know that it's OK to have

any kinds of feelings and that you won't react negatively to it."

**YOU OR YOUR SPOUSE**

Yep, this one is tough.

**HOW TO BRING IT UP:** Try to ferret out what your child already knows (or thinks he knows) rather than launching into a lengthy explanation, says Rauch. She suggests probing with specific questions, like

"Have you noticed that I've been walking with a limp? Or that Grandma has been calling a lot?"

After assessing what he knows, tell him a simple version of the diagnosis and plans for treatment and keeping the house running smoothly. Balance it with loads of reassurance. Mention that you will always be sure to tell him if anything changes. Finally, clue in his caregivers ASAP. "From friends' parents to the track coach to the freshman dean, they all need to be aware of what your child is going through so they can support him and pick up on problems," says Rauch.

**HOW TO HELP THEM COPE:** Turn the family into a team so kids can feel as if you are all working together to get you well, says Imber-Black. Do a charity walk or bike ride to raise money for the disease, or make family T-shirts with supportive slogans. "I had one dad call me from a breast cancer walk because he had to tell me his 12-year-old daughter, who had been anxious and withdrawn since her mother's diagnosis, was warning



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Get tips on what to say to a sick friend in your own life at [realsimple.com/sickfriend](https://realsimple.com/sickfriend).



up and holding her mom's hand," says Brooks. That all-in mentality can also work when you need help around the house.

**AS THINGS GET WORSE:** Make sure that you aren't asking too much of older children. You might learn that cooking dinner once a week is making your daughter miss practice, and she didn't want to bother you about it. "Extra responsibilities shouldn't interfere with activities that bring normalcy into their lives," says Brooks. Be prepared for kids of all ages to act out, says Imber-Black: "They're scared and sad, and that turns to anger."

Let your child know that you are worried, too, so you can be in it together. Says Rauch: "Say, 'Sometimes I feel worried. I know that sometimes you are worried, and we should share our worries with each other. None of us have to go up and down by ourselves.'"

And when the prognosis is the worst? Keep talking. Articulate as much as you can about timing in a reassuring way. "The doctor is focused on shrinking my tumor, and that is making me sick, but no one is worried about me dying in the next six months or even the next year," says Rauch. "It makes it hard to live in the present if you think your parent is going to die any minute."

If you notice certain behaviors—not sleeping or eating, bed wetting, thumb sucking, trouble leaving the house, or being less engaged in activities or with friends—consider having your child talk to a therapist. "Don't assume that they are going to cry," says Kastner. "The beautiful thing about kids is that, with support, they can handle a lot, because they'll get busy with their own lives—and that's good news."