

Stress in Children: Watch Out for These Signs

There's no "right" or "normal" way for a child to respond to a parent's cancer diagnosis. Some children may become distraught and anxious, while others may act like everything is fine. Behaviors and feelings may come and go, with a child acting out in anger one moment and becoming clingy and apologetic the next.

Dealing with a parent's cancer diagnosis can be a significant source of stress for even the most well-adjusted child. Sometimes, though, the stressor becomes a burden that affects their well-being and has potential long-term consequences. So how do you know if you should be concerned?

Troubling Behaviors

These warning signs may indicate that your child is having trouble coping with your illness:

- Problems at school (getting in trouble in class, struggling with grades)
- Frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Regressive behaviors, such as an older child wetting the bed or engaging in baby talk
- Persistent temper tantrums
- Eating too much or too little
- Increased arguments with siblings or other family members
- Uncharacteristic separation anxiety
- Neglect of responsibilities, hobbies, or extracurricular activities
- Physical problems like nausea, headaches, or chest or stomach pain
- Attempts to be perfect or good all the time
- Engaging in risky behavior, like smoking, drinking, or drugs

It's important to know that no single sign is proof that your child needs intervention – most children exhibit some of these behaviors at some point. It's also crucial to separate troubling behavior from that which is age appropriate. For example, toddlers have frequent temper tantrums, and many teens engage in risky behavior.

You know your child best. Monitor persistent behavior that seems outside the norm for your child's age and personality. If the troubling actions persist for a longer period of time than what you'd consider typical, whether that's several days or a few months, your child may need extra support.

Being Attentive to Thoughts and Feelings

Your child may display more subtle ways that he or she is struggling with your illness. Pay attention to the words they use to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Signs that may indicate significant distress include:

- Preoccupation with cancer that affects your child's daily life
- New phobias
- Anxiety, anger, or shame because of your illness
- Preoccupation with death: worries that you or other family members are going to die, or a desire to die themselves
- Difficulty focusing
- Feeling guilt for things that are not their fault

How to Help Your Child

If these behaviors, thoughts, or feelings are becoming persistent or dangerous, consider seeking help. Get support for friends or family so you're not dealing with this alone.

Your child may benefit from you:

- **Practicing open communication.** Focus on honest, regular conversations with your child about how they're feeling about your cancer.
- **Reestablishing routines.** If life has been disrupted by your illness, get back to a regular schedule, even if it's different than before. Consistency helps children feel secure.
- **Encouraging peer support.** Find ways for them to connect to other children their age who are in similar situations. UT Southwestern offers one-on-one peer support and [support groups for people affected by cancer](#).
- **Seeking psychosocial support**, such as mental health counseling, education, and church groups, which can provide the guidance your child needs.

More Information and Resources

Learn how [Support Services](#) at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help you explain your illness to your children.