



By Denise King Gillingham, MSW

Kids Can Cope

Ten tips for helping a child navigate a family illness—and other challenging situations



You have received unpleasant, life-changing news. It's bad for you, but it's worse for your child or children. Or is it? Keep in mind that children are incredibly resilient and are able to deal with life's challenges, large and small. Still, as adults, we can help them cope by keeping their needs and perspective in mind. Consider these basic guidelines when you and your children are next facing a difficult situation.

1 *Remember that children are little people.*

Just as you would not ask them to digest an adult-sized meal, don't ask them to digest adult-sized information. Give them teaspoons of life—not a whole plateful. As they become more comfortable with a situation, they will begin to understand more.

2 *Answer the questions they are asking, but keep it simple.*

Streamline your answers—just the facts. If you bombard children with lots of information, they will feel overwhelmed. They will ask questions if they want to know more. And remember: they probably understand more than they are letting on.

3 *Keep your own emotions in check in front of your kids.*

Expressing emotion honestly and releasing feelings is very important, but choose your audience. Your children are just that—children. They expect you to be the adult and to respond to situations with appropriate emotionality. They will become scared and feel unsafe if they see you falling apart in front of them.

4 *Look for the fun.*

Try to find something to laugh about together every day. This will help both you and your children. Studies have shown that laughter has very positive effects on the body and the mind. When I was told that I was going to lose my hair as a result of chemotherapy, my daughters and I went out and bought wigs—we were going to play dress up together! It made the situation more palatable for all of us.

5 *No surprises!*

My husband and I were seriously ill at the same time. Our daughters were aware of this. I explained various things that would be happening, such as an impending biopsy, which helped the girls deal with events as they unfolded. At one point, however, I slipped up. I decided to shave my head in advance of the inevitable hair

loss that would occur during chemotherapy, and my husband shaved his head to support me. Our mistake? We decided to do this when our daughters were away from home, without telling them what we were doing. When they came home, they were very upset. Not only did they think we looked like monsters, but they were not prepared. To this day, four years later, they mention that day as one of the most difficult.

6 *Be honest.*

If someone is gravely ill, don't tell a child that the person will get well soon. Remember that it's okay to admit that you don't know the answer. If you are not honest with a child about the situation, they will not be able to prepare themselves for what is happening, and you will ultimately lose their trust. If you are honest, they might not always like what they hear, but they will trust you.

7 *Appreciate and listen.*

Children have a fresh, wonderful perspective. Take the time to tune in to what your kids are telling you. At the very least, they will make you smile and forget your troubles for a minute.

8 *Model the behavior that you would like to see.*

The gravity of the situation calls for appropriate behavior—in spite of the challenges you face.

9 *Share your own coping strategies.*

Tell your kids about the tools you are grateful for—exercise, the comfort of a good friend, or keeping a journal of your

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thoughts. This will give them ideas and allow them to see that they have the power to comfort themselves in this situation and throughout their lives.

10 *Accept kindness and help from others.*

Be grateful and gracious in allowing people to help your family, whether it's by inviting your children for a play date, offering help with meals, or any other thoughtful gesture. Although my children were sad when I was in treatment, they have many happy memories of that time because of all the play dates and adventures they enjoyed with new friends. Remember that people want to help during this time!

BONUS TIP: In general, look for the gifts and the teaching opportunities that arise in challenging situations. Do your best to help your children manage and navigate this difficult time, and they will be more prepared to take on other of life's challenges. ❀

Denise King Gillingham, MSW, is a cancer survivor and a co-active coach who specializes in helping people navigate change and realize their magnificence. Her international practice includes clients from all areas of life, including executives, cancer patients, artists, ex-patriots, and housewives. Denise received her master of social work degree from Columbia University and has been a mental health professional for more than 15 years. She shifted her focus from therapy to coaching in 2006. Her professional experience includes private practice in Prague, Czech Republic; crisis intervention with New York University; in-patient therapy at Payne Whitney Clinic in New York City; and substance abuse counseling at Bronx VA Medical Center in New York City. Denise also served as a certified associate and an outplacement consultant with Lee Hecht Harrison, Inc. She conducts workshops on emotional intelligence in the United States and Europe. Contact Denise at dkgcoach@gmail.com.