

When your child is diagnosed with chronic illness

How to cope



Parents want to protect their children and keep them safe. It can be particularly devastating to learn that your child has a [chronic illness](#) such as diabetes, cancer or juvenile arthritis. By managing your own emotions during this time, you and your child can experience greater well-being.

Stress and emotions

When a child is diagnosed with chronic illness, it's ordinary for parents to feel guilt and sadness. Anger is also common. You may feel angry toward your partner, the world at large or even, at times, toward your child. These feelings are normal.

Addressing your child's medical condition directly is the best way to move forward. A study of parents of children with cancer found those parents who took action and focused on the problem experienced lower levels of anxiety and depression than parents who denied or avoided the situation.¹

Stress levels can spike when caring for an ill child. One recent study found that mothers and fathers experienced similar stressors when caring for an ill child, but mothers experienced higher stress levels, perhaps because they're typically the child's primary caregiver. The same study suggested lack of control may be the most stressful aspect of caregiving — parents can feel a loss of control when, for example, they are unable to help their child feel better, or are uncertain about the future prognosis.²

It's important to manage your own stress. A study of children with type 1 diabetes found high levels of parental distress were associated with higher stress and depressive symptoms in their children. Kids whose parents had high stress levels also had poorer management of the disease.³ Build a support network you can rely on to help ease your load. Also make time to take care of yourself, both physically and mentally. Eating well, exercising and staying connected to hobbies or other interests can help keep stress in check. Don't feel guilty to take some time for your own mental health. In the long run, doing so will help both you and your child.

Relating to your child

When a child is sick, parents often have a tendency to become overprotective. Try not to shelter your child or limit his activities unnecessarily. On the other hand, some parents of sick children become overly permissive — allowing the child to stay up late, for example, or to have extra snacks. But children crave structure, and may become scared or confused if you start breaking your own rules. As much as possible, try to maintain the same family routine you had before your child became ill.

Many parents struggle with how to speak to a child about his or her illness. Be sure you're sharing age-appropriate information. Don't give too much information, but also don't try to hide the facts. If a child overhears a doctor or doesn't understand what's happening, he or she may begin to imagine the worst.

Talk to your child about what he or she is feeling. Parents may be surprised by which aspects of an illness are most difficult for a child. For instance, children with cancer may find not being able to do things they used to do more stressful than uncertainty about their survival.⁴

Sick kids can also feel isolated at school. Help them practice a short script so they can explain their condition to friends or classmates who ask questions or stare.

If you have other children, it's important to make some one-on-one time with them, too, so they know they're still important. Make them part of the team; help them figure out how they can be involved in caring for their brother or sister.

Enlisting help

[Psychologists](#) are trained to help both you and your child accept and [manage a chronic illness](#). Use the APA's [Psychologist Locator](#) to find a psychologist in your area who can help. Even when things are going well, it's helpful to establish a relationship with a psychologist early on. If new complications arise later — when a child transitions to adolescence, for instance — you'll have a familiar resource to turn to.

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References

¹ Norberg, A.L., Lindblad, F., and Borman, K.K. (2005). "Coping strategies in parents of children with cancer." *Social Science & Medicine*,60(5): 965-975.

² Rodriguez, E.M., Dunn, M.J., Zuckerman, T., Vannatta, K., Gerhardt, C.A., and Compas, B.E. (2012). "Cancer-related sources of stress for children with cancer and their parents." *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*,37(2): 185-197.

³ Whittemore, R., Jaser, S., Chao, A., Jang, M., and Grey, M. "Psychological experience of parents of children with type 1 diabetes: A systematic mixed-studies review." *The Diabetes Educator*,38(4): 562-579.

⁴ Rodriguez, E.M., Dunn, M.J., Zuckerman, T., Vannatta, K., Gerhardt, C.A., and Compas, B.E. (2012). "Cancer-related sources of stress for children with cancer and their parents." *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*,37(2): 185-197.

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