

When a Family Anticipates Loss of a Loved One

The diagnosis of a life-limiting illness brings the whole family down a path that changes their lives forever, and will be exhausting both mentally and physically. When an immediate family member is expected to die, it is challenging for the adults to know the right things to do for their children. Talking about an impending death is one of the most difficult conversations to have, however, being open and honest with children and youth helps them to begin to process and understand the changes to come. Ideally, it is good to start providing children information and answering their questions in the early days of the illness.

Members of the family's social support circle, including teachers, social workers, health professionals, friends and extended family can all play important roles in holding a family aloft during such a rocky time.

SUPPORT TO THE PARENTS/GUARDIANS

HOW CAN I HELP?

- ♥ Your support to the parents/caregivers helps the whole family. A parent/caregiver whose needs are addressed and supported will be more capable of caring for the needs of the child/youth.
- ♥ Families don't anticipate or plan for being faced with an early death. Acknowledge this and give space for the seriously ill person and other family members to consider, and talk about their needs, concerns and fears.
- ♥ While much of the focus is on the patient, the surviving parent/caregiver needs time and attention. Giving them your full attention (even if only for a few minutes) will send a message that their wellness matters too.
- ♥ Parents/caregivers often feel guilty about receiving assistance. It can be helpful for them to know that self care is necessary for their own health and their ability to function well for their child/youth.
- ♥ You might open a conversation with the parents/caregiver about what their child knows regarding the family member's illness. If they had not yet told their child that the person will die, it may be helpful for them to talk through their concerns about telling their child/youth and to plan ahead for what they will say.
- ♥ If a seriously ill parent/caregiver has not accepted the fatal diagnosis, they will likely be resistant to talking with the child/youth on the topic. The other parent/caregiver may need support in navigating these difficult conversations.
- ♥ A dying parent/caregiver may also be reluctant to discuss what the needs of their child/youth will be after their own death. It may be better received if framed as continuing to focus on getting well (hoping for the best), while also remaining connected to their child/youth, and creating and sharing legacy (preparing for the worst).
- ♥ Schedules become busier when a family member is unwell. Assisting to free up some of the parent/caregiver's tasks will give them more time for self-care or to spend with their child/youth. This might include direct assistance or organizing others to help with: transporting the child/youth to activities; meals for the family; running errands, or grocery shopping, etc.

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TALKING WITH CHILDREN/YOUTH

The diagnosis of a life-limiting illness often brings change and losses for family members long before the person's death. This leaves less time and attention for the child/youth, and their regular activities must often be put on hold.

- ♥ Caring adults can play vital roles in supporting the child/youth, including being a person with whom they can talk and share their concerns. Some points to consider:
 - ♥ Children/teens are often reluctant to talk about the situation out of embarrassment or because they don't want to upset others. Sharing what you know helps makes it easier for them to talk if they want.
 - ♥ Acknowledge the kinds of difficulties and sacrifices that children/youth have to make when a family member is seriously ill; wonder aloud what changes and challenges the child/teen is experiencing.
 - ♥ Be open to a broad range of feelings the child/youth may experience, including worries and fears, or resentment and anger toward medical professionals, family members and even the person who is dying.

- ♥ If the child/youth is open to talking with you about their impending loss consider exploring unfinished business, anything they would like to say or do with the ill family member.
- ♥ If the child/youth wants to talk about the impending death with their parent/guardian but is hesitant or nervous, consider offering to help them formulate and write down their questions and concerns.
- ♥ Respect and validate the child/youth's need to focus on other parts of their life. When illness and impending death are so much of daily home life, it is natural for the young person to engage in activities that provide distraction and help stay engaged in life. For younger children, imaginary play is a way they process thoughts and feelings. For older children/youth, time with peers becomes increasingly important for connection; sports/hobbies can be good outlets for stress.
- ♥ The most important way to help a child/youth facing an impending death of their family member is to be fully present when you are with them, be a non-judgmental listener, and if possible, remain available in their life throughout the illness and for some time after the death.

At Lighthouse we recognize that communities are diverse, and grief will look different across and within cultures as well as within families, from the way it is experienced to the way it is expressed. There is no right or wrong way to confront end of life and grief. Taking a culturally humble approach, allowing a family to teach you about their needs and grief process enables you to learn how you can best offer support that is meaningful.

The Lighthouse is available for free telephone consultations regarding ways to support and talk with children/youth anticipating or who have experienced a life-altering death. **905-337-2333**