Coping with a diagnosis of cancer in children

The Fiji Times · 23 Sep 2022 · 20

LEARNING that your child has cancer usually makes parents feel like their world is crumbling or has been turned upside down.



Everything in their life may suddenly feel out of control and their initial thoughts may be "how could this have happened to my child?" and "how will we get through this?"

According to Stanford Medicine Children's Health grieving is a normal response to a loss – the loss can include the loss of your previously healthy child, the loss of your normal daily routine, the impact of the diagnosis on other family members, and the financial impact of the diagnosis.

The grieving process varies from person to person in terms of the order in which one experiences the stages of grief, as well as the time it takes to go through the grief process.

The child with cancer, the parents, siblings, and other family members, will all experience grief. Grief is usually divided into five stages:

Denial

Denial is a stage where people try to believe that the cancer diagnosis is not happening to them, their child, or their family.

One may feel numb, or in a state of shock and denial is a protective emotion when a life event is too overwhelming to deal with all at once.

It is normal, and is not a problem unless it stands in the way of getting the child needed medical care.

Anger

Anger is a stage in which you understand the cancer diagnosis and are very upset and angry that it has happened in your family.

One of the best ways of dealing with bursts of anger is to exercise or participate in another type of physical activity.

Or maybe even talking with family and friends, other parents who has a child with cancer, and the hospital staff, may also be helpful.

The child also needs to be able to express his or her anger by therapeutic play, talking to other children, drawing pictures of how they feel, or writing in a journal.

Bargaining

Questioning God, asking "Why my child?" and "What did we do to deserve this?" are common questions in this stage.

It is normal for parents to make bargains with themselves or God, in hopes that this will make the cancer diagnosis go away.

Guilt is a primary emotion during this stage and searching for something that you personally did, which could have contributed to the cancer in your child, is all part of bargaining.

Parents tell themselves or God that they promise not to do something they previously did (such as arguing with family members), or to start doing something they have not done (such as going to church regularly), in exchange for their child's cancer recovery.

It is important to remember that there is nothing that you or your child did which contributed to the cancer – it is no one's fault.

Depression or sadness

This is a stage in which the diagnosis of cancer can no longer be denied and parents and children may feel a profound sense of sadness – this is normal.

It can be accompanied by physical changes, such as trouble sleeping, or excessive sleeping, changes in appetite, difficulty with concentrating on simple daily activities, or feeling a constant fear that someone else in the family will be diagnosed with cancer.

It is important to talk about depression with a healthcare professional, such as a social worker or counsellor, or meet with a support group to help you cope with these feelings.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a stage in which you have accepted the cancer diagnosis and are at a point where cancer has been incorporated as part of your life.

You have made an adjustment to your child's illness – this does not mean that you will never feel other emotions, but usually families find that they are better able to manage their lives overall once they reach this stage.

Going through the grieving process is the best way to cope with a cancer diagnosis and you may find yourself moving in and out of the various stages as your family goes through the cancer experience.

By giving yourself, your child, and your family permission to do this, you will be able to cope.

Source: www.stanfordchildrens.org