

Children and Parental illness

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By Dr Brighton Chireka

"Children and parental illness needs our attention. It may not be possible to control the reality of illness but it is possible to make a big difference in how our kids tolerate it and carry on with their lives regardless of the outcome of our illness", says Dr Chireka

Children and parental illness is a very sensitive topic which we rarely talk about. I would like to thank team Carol for raising this issue about children and parental illness. It is important for the ill parent to understand their own feelings before they can talk to their children. Once a parent has come to terms with their own fear , anger , and sadness, they become better able to help those who depend on them. Having said that one cannot expect to be in total control of every feeling they may have but should be strong enough to open up about their illness.

Are we protecting our children?

We all want to protect our children but in doing so we may be making them suffer more by not involving them in our illnesses . Children must be given information and support so that they know what to expect as far as the illness of their parent is concerned. Whatever the outcome of the illness , children may be able to handle it if they are prepared for it . If children are not prepared they may feel confused , hurt and angry that the diagnosis was not shared with them. We know that kids rely on us parents to bring order and security into their lives. We help our children to understand the work around them and their place in it.

Involving our children

Not involving your children may send the message that they are not important part of the family. This may also send wrong messages to children that illness is so terrible that they will not be able to cope with it. Sadly some kids may even believe that they were not told because it is their fault that their parent fell sick. Children do know and suspect when we are unwell and not preparing them leaves them alone to make sense of a difficult situation.

Personal view about children and parental illness

I would not want to leave my children under such stress hence me writing this article about children and parental illness. I had to open up to my eight year old daughter but I was surprised at the amount of information she knew and the comfort she gave me . She even told me that we must pray for mum so that God can heal her. So from that day I started to pray with my daughter and the faith that was in my daughter kept me going. After praying she would be happy and carry on with her life leaving me the "doubting Thomas " to have more questions than answers about the illness .

When can we tell our children?

We all wonder when can we then tell our children about our illness. There is no set time as many factors influence a child need to be told about a parent's illness. It depends on how you interact with your children and how open you are with regard to illness. If the channels of communication are open then the child would have been involved from the beginning that mum or dad is unwell. My advice to you is that kids need to be told the truth in small amounts over several days or even weeks depending on how ill a parent is . This way they have a chance to adjust to what they can understand while still going about their everyday lives.

This school must be informed so that they can support your children and help them to come to terms with the illness. The school can involve their counsellors to offer professional help . I know that some of us parents would rather avoid or postpone this talk, but I am afraid if you wait for the "right time" it may sadly not happen at all.

What can I share with my children?

What you share with your child will depend on their age and stage of development . Make sure you have uninterrupted time to talk to them. Please get another person to be there like your spouse or close relative for support.

You may want to ask your children about what they think is going on with you . You may also ask them about what changes have they noticed and also their worst fears. Remember children may believe that because you are on tablets you will recover and because they have prayed you will be healed. They do not think that it may fail so you need to gradually explain to them if the situation deteriorates as the beginning of the end starts.

If you are on treatment , you need to let your children know that the tablets are helping you to get better. If things do change it will be easier to tell them that the tablets are no longer working and the illness is not getting better and your body is not working as it should be. It is also important to be open with your children depending on the their age and your illness . If your illness is terminal and no curative treatment is available then children must be made aware of this. It is very important that they know as it will prepare them of any outcome of your illness.

What to expect from Children?

Be prepared for different reactions from children, some may be angry whereas other may be in denial. We know that all children depend on their parents for security and love so a parent should explain the new arrangements in place whilst the illness is being attended to. My daughter was

worried about how she was going to school as her mum used to take her . I reassured her that I would step in and also a lovely neighbour chipped in and made our lives easier .

I hope we will be able to engage our children in these hard and difficult discussions . Not engaging is not an option as far as I am concerned . Let's start walking the talk!

This article was compiled by Dr Brighton Chireka, who is a GP and a Health Commissioner in South Kent Coast in the United Kingdom. You can contact him at: info@docbeecee.co.uk and can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

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