Emotional and Mental Health after Cancer

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Overview

- What are emotions and how do they affect us?
- Emotional and cognitive development in kids
- What happens in cancer
- The family context
- Tips and tools
Emotional and Mental Health... what does that even mean?

- Everyone experiences a range of emotions
- Normal responses to different situations
Emotions can be triggered by situations

- Situation
  - Something happens

- Emotional Response
  - Resulting feelings

- Behavior
  - How you respond
Emotions can be triggered by situations

- **Situation**
  - You get an A on your test

- **Emotional Response**
  - You feel happy

- **Behavior**
  - Engage in positive behaviors
Emotions can be triggered by situations

- **Situation**: You fail a test
- **Emotional Response**: You feel sad
- **Behavior**: Hang out alone
General development in kids

- Start to grow intellectually and think about things in different ways
- Learn to balance friends and family
- Learn to adjust to society’s behavioral expectations
- Figure out who you are and what’s important to you
- Prepare to become an adult
The developmental trajectory

- Child
- Pre-teen
- Teenager
- Young Adult

Independence
The developmental trajectory

- Independence
- Usual
- Child
- Pre-teen
- Teenager
- Young Adult

Cancer
The developmental trajectory

Independence

Child  Pre-teen  Teenager  Young Adult

Usual

Cancer
Cancer changes things

- Missed milestones
- Identity
- Less independence
- Less structure
- Can’t hang out with friends
- Loss of control
- Fatigue/feeling sick
- Family changes

Cancer
Issues for the child post-cancer

- Developing your new identity
- Reintegrating with friends
- Fitting in back at school
- Ongoing medical follow-ups, medications
- Being independent again
Issues for the parents post-cancer

• Balancing parenting vs. protecting
  • Allowing your child to be an active participant in medical decision-making
  • Helping them take the lead on making decisions about their lives
  • Encouraging social activities

• Dealing with your own worries and uncertainty
And sometimes...

- Most common diagnoses
  - Adjustment
  - Mood (depression)
  - Anxiety
    - Post-traumatic stress symptoms
    - Post-traumatic stress disorder
The family context

- Parents
- Child
- Siblings
- Extended family
The family context

- Parents
- Child
- Siblings
- Extended family

- Family challenges
- Communication difficulties
- Stress
- Life disruptions
Stress and the family context

Morris et al. (1997); Phipps & Mulhern (1995)
A stress cycle

- Stress
- Communication issues
- Arguments
- Negative behaviors
So what can you do?

Put cancer on the table, not under it
For parents – for your kids

- Leave communication open
- Be aware of your child’s feelings – and ask!
- Validate your child’s feelings
- Help increase autonomy, control
- Establish routines collaboratively
- Problem-solving
For parents – for yourselves

- Be aware of your own feelings and reactions
- Self-care
- Social support
- Maintain your relationships and friendships
- Let go of Superman/Superwoman
For kids

- Share your feelings
- Ask for help when you need it
- Establish routines to help you keep on top of things
- Find ways to have mastery over your day-to-day activities
- Remember to keep doing fun things
Structure, structure, structure!

- Build routines
  - Morning
  - School
  - After school
  - Mealtimes
  - Bedtime
Dealing with stress

- Behavioral activation
- Relaxation/deep breathing/guided imagery
- Talk it out
- Distraction
Problem-solving

“RIBEYE”

• R – Relax
• I – Identify the problem
• B – Brainstorm options
• E – Evaluate options (pros/cons)
• Y – Say “Yes” to one
• E – Encourage/Execute/Evaluate
When to seek professional help

- Symptoms are causing significant difficulties in one or more settings
- Child asks for help
- Strain in the parent-child relationship stemming from adjustment issues
- Parent or marital adjustment difficulties are beginning to affect child/family
- Sibling is experiencing concerning changes in behavior
“We acquire the strength we have overcome.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson