

# Supporting Children Through a Parent's Cancer Journey



Wonders & Worries

Professional support for children  
through a parent's illness.

We will, together.

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Wonders & Worries Program Director

# Objectives

- Participants will gain an increased understanding of how a serious illness in the family can impact children.
- Participants will learn specific skills regarding helping children understand their caregiver's diagnosis, treatment and treatment side effects.
- Participants will be able to discuss and implement tools to help children cope with the impact of having a parent with a serious illness in their lives.

# WONDERS & WORRIES

## How Our Programs Work

### Education

Give age-appropriate understanding of illnesses, treatments & side effects

### Feelings

Facilitate communication of feelings related to changes in the family

### Coping

Identify individual coping skills to help ease stress, sadness, anger & fear



Diagnosis can be  
devastating to  
the entire family

Parents are  
concerned about  
the impact on  
their children

## Families and Illness

Parents may find  
it difficult or  
don't have the  
resources to  
focus on the  
needs of their  
children

Can impact the  
child's mood,  
ability to cope  
and behavior at  
home at school

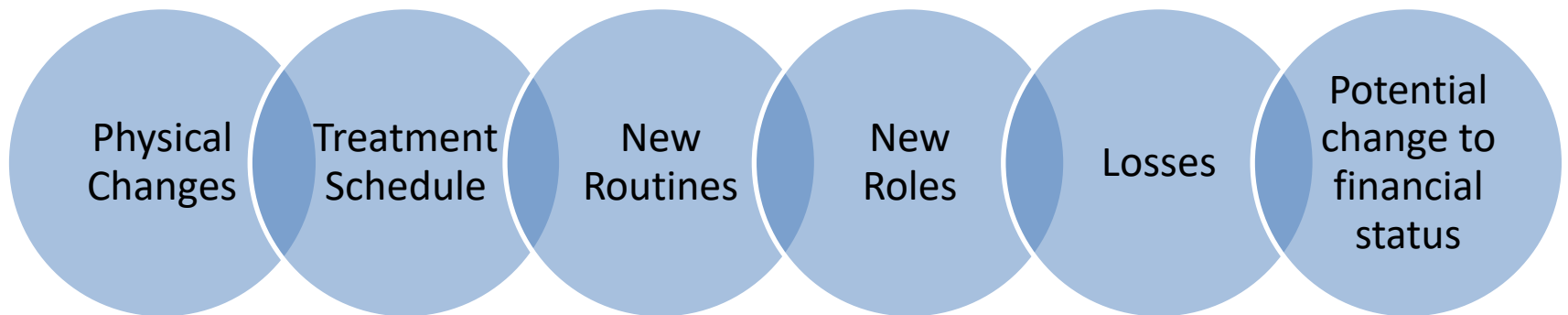


## Children Most Often...



- Know when something is going on in the family and fill in gaps in information with own version.
- Want to handle crisis in a positive way
- Do have the potential to cope and grow through crisis
- Children often want to “protect” the adult
- “Self Dose” themselves with information

# Stress Points for Families



# **DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT & UNDERSTANDING OF ILLNESS**

# Common Stressors and Fears

## Infant & Toddler

### Understanding

- Limited understanding of illness
- Sense the feelings of parents such as anxiety
- Aware of separation from caregivers
- Toddlers may react to physical changes in parents or the side effects of treatment

### Possible Reactions

- Fussiness
- Clinging
- Regression
- Crying
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Increase tantrums or behavior outbursts

# Common Stressors and Fears

## Infant & Toddler



# Common Stressors and Fears

## Preschoolers

### Understanding

- Beginning level of understanding of illness
- Magical Thinking-they caused the illness
- Egocentric and everything related to and revolves around them
- Illness may be seen as punishment
- May be concerned they can catch the illness

### Possible Reaction

- Regression
- Fears
- Nightmares
- Hyperactivity
- Apathy
- Increased difficulty with separation
- Aggression

# Common Stressors and Fears

## Preschoolers



# Common Stressors and Fears

## School Age

### Understanding

- More complex explanation of illness and body functioning
- Misperceptions still present related to cause
- The middle of this age group can understand parent could die

### Possible Reaction

- Irritable
- Sad, crying
- Anxiety, guilt, jealousy
- Physical complaints
- Difficulty at school
- Fear of new situations and separation
- Sensitivity to shame and embarrassment
- Hostility toward ill parent



# Common Stressors and Fears

## School Age



# Common Stressors and Fears

## Adolescent

### Understanding

- Abstract thinkers and can process things they have not experienced themselves
- Understand people are fragile
- Able to understand reasons for symptoms
- Able to understand complex relationships between events

### Possible Reactions

- Want to be more independent and treated like an adult
- Anger/ rebellion/ poor judgment
- Depression/ Anxiety
- Withdrawal/ apathy
- Physical symptoms
- Turn feelings inward



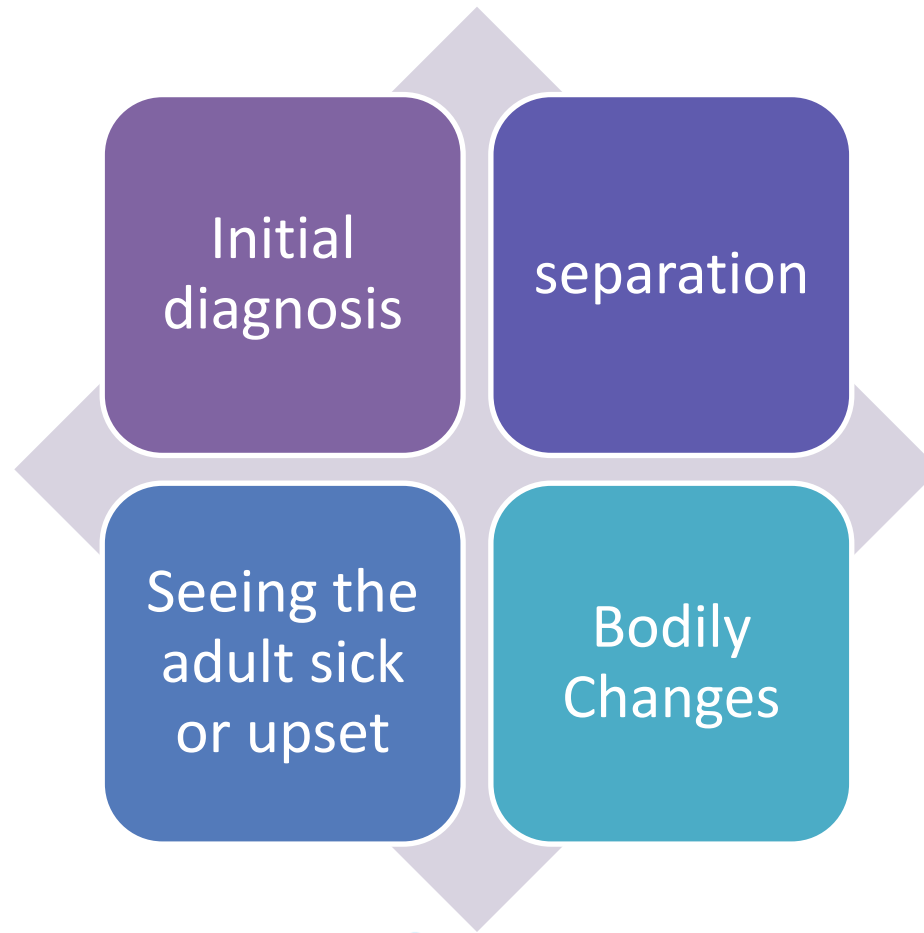
# Common Stressors and Fears

## Adolescent



# Supporting Children and Caregivers

## Most Difficult Times for Families



# Initial Diagnosis

## When Talking About Cancer

- Start talking earlier rather than later
  - Children and teens will benefit from honest education as soon as possible to allow processing time
  - Share the treatment/comfort plan
  - Include the child or teen in decisions on daily care and how he/she can contribute
- Repetition is key
  - We know that children need information repeated so they can remember and process the information.
  - Best to give small chunks of information at a time and then review it weekly, monthly, as needed.
  - Encourage open and regular communication and questions
    - Weekly family meetings
    - Wonders & Worries Jar



# Initial Diagnosis

## When Children Don't Ask Questions



- Recognize non-verbal communication
- Encourage families to develop a routine for sharing information
- Use books, question jars and outside support
- Respect the child's natural coping style

# Initial Diagnosis

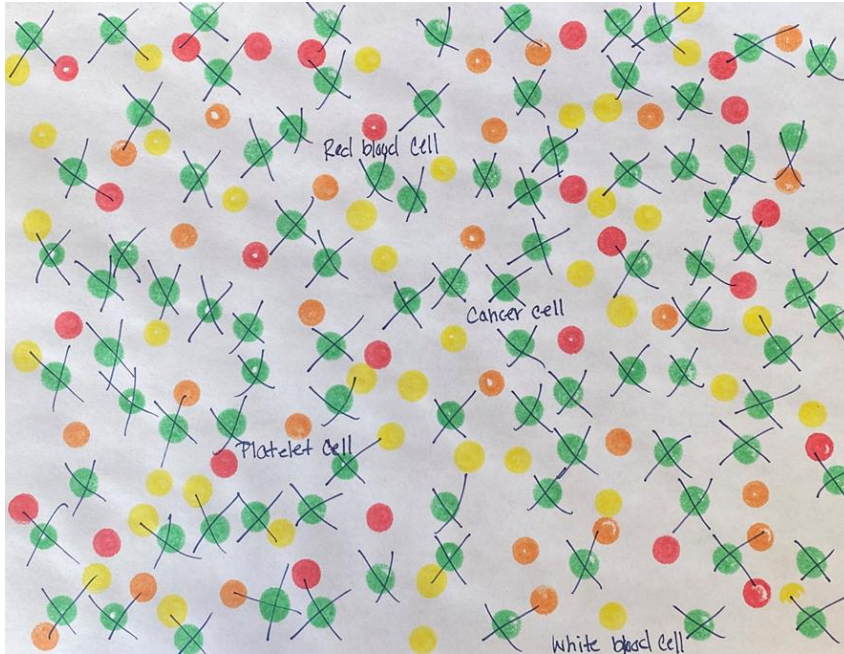
## When Talking About Cancer: Conversation Starters

- “There is something important I want to talk with you about.”
- “When you said \_\_\_\_\_ it made me think we should talk about \_\_\_\_\_.”
- “I was wondering what you know about \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “I've noticed you have been curious about \_\_\_\_\_.”
- “Some things have been happening with \_\_\_\_\_ that I want to be sure you understood.”



# Initial Diagnosis

## When Talking About Cancer



- HALT
- Use the word Cancer
- Provide education regarding cells
- Talk about ways cancer can be treated and the side effects
- Focus on the goal of controlling/managing the cancer

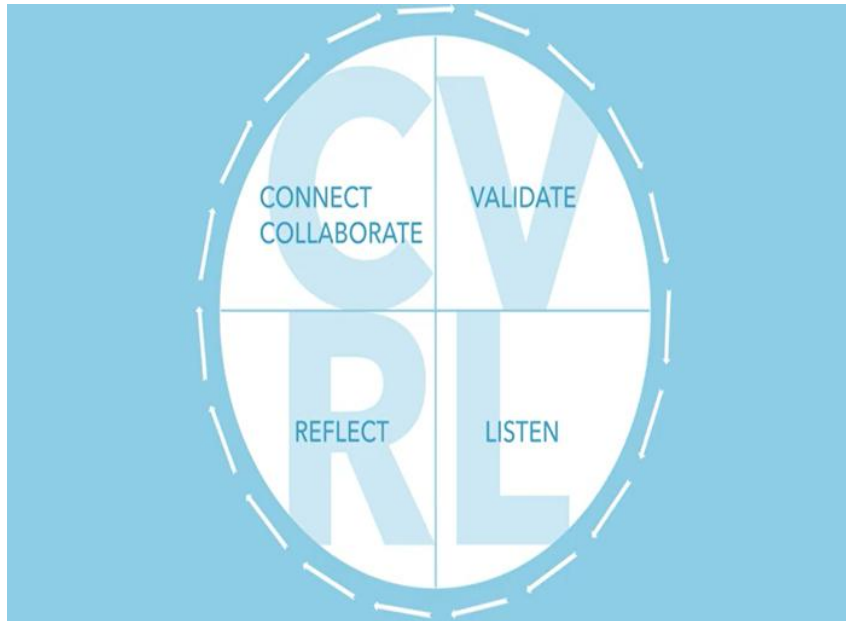
# Initial Diagnosis

## When Talking About Cancer :Books

- [Someone I Love is Sick: Helping Very Young Children Cope with Cancer in the Family](#) by Kathleen McCue (2009)
- [Sammy's Mom Has Cancer](#) by Sherry Kohlenberg (1993)
- [I Wonder What It's Like When a Parent Has Cancer: Max's Story](#) by Jacquelyn Rebeck, illustrated by Anna Boxall (2023)
- [The Hope Tree](#) by Laura Numeroff & Wendy Harpham, M.D. (1999)
- [The Cancer that wouldn't go away](#) by Hadassa Field (2012)
- [When Mommy Had a Mastectomy](#) by Nancy Reuben Greenfield (2016)
- [My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks](#) by Maya & Mark Silver (2013)
- [https://wondersandworries.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/WW\\_TalkingAboutCancer\\_2023.pdf](https://wondersandworries.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/WW_TalkingAboutCancer_2023.pdf)

# Initial Diagnosis

## CVLR



- Misconception: My job is to make my child happy?
- Encourage parents to focus on: I want to help my child cope with the realm of human emotion.
  - Reflective listening and role modeling
  - True acceptance of all emotions

# Initial Diagnosis

## Common Questions Children Think About

- What will happen to my family member?
- What will treatment be like?
- Did I cause the illness?
- Can I “catch” it?
- Who will take care of things that dad/or mom does ordinarily before he/she got sick?



# Supporting Children Separation

Hospitalization

Fear of death

Parent unable to  
provide normal  
caregiving or  
playtime



# Supporting Children

## Books and Activities For Separation



- The Kissing Hand by Patrice Karst
  - Security object to keep and hold
- The Invisible String by Audrey Penn
  - String of hearts connecting loved ones
- Paper Chains with encouraging notes
- Reading together or recorded books
- Traveling Teddy Bear
- Video chat

# Supporting Children

## Seeing Parents Sick or Upset

Loss of hair

Scars from  
surgery or  
procedures

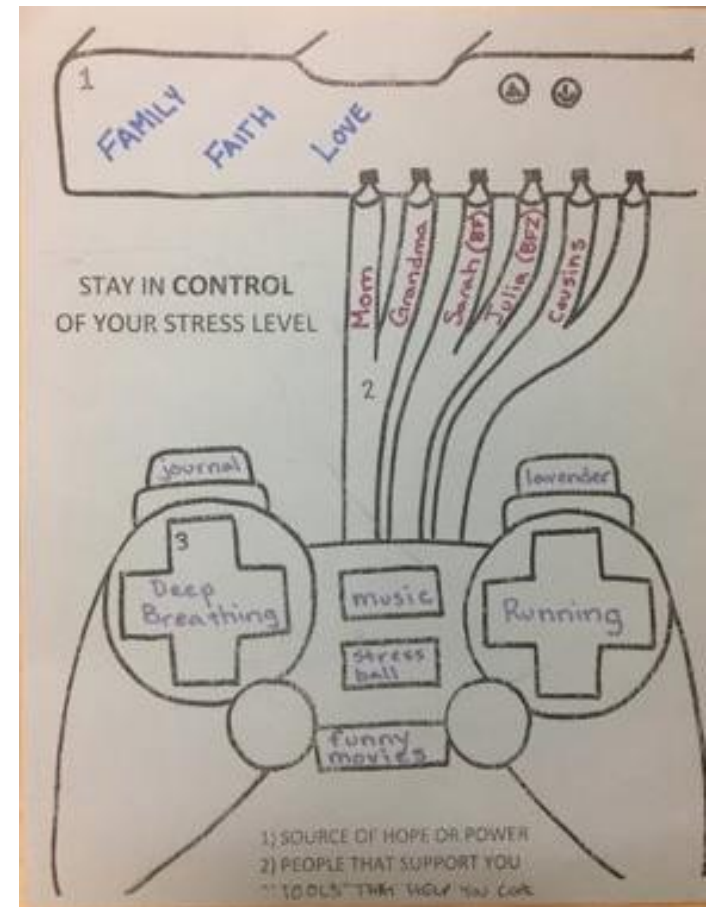
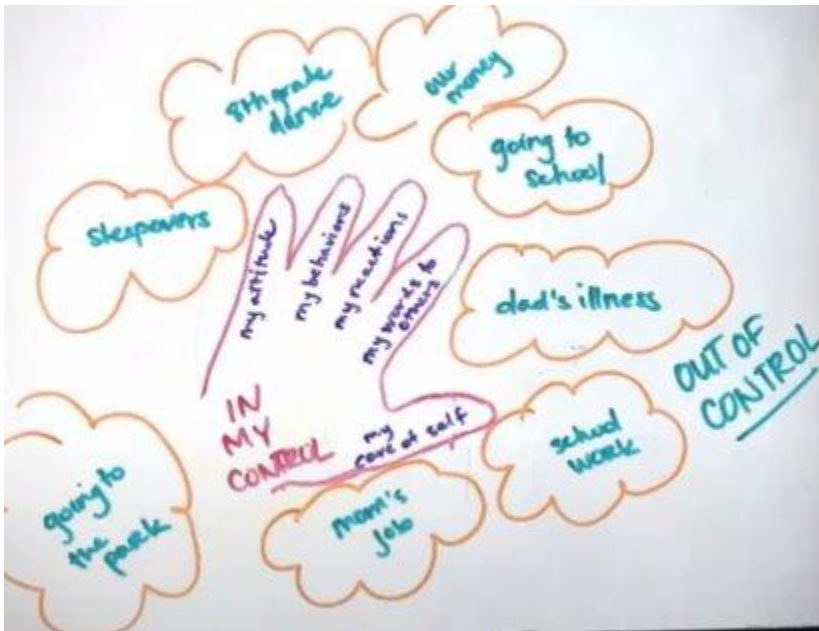
Port-a-  
cath/PICC line

Mobility  
devices



# Activities for Coping With Change

## What Is In My Control



# Supporting Children

## Positive Coping

- Help children express their feelings
- Validate and normalize feelings
- Help children develop personal coping strategies
- Don't do things for children that they can do for themselves
  - Increase self-confidence instead of fostering helplessness.

Expressive  
art activities

Talking to  
loved ones

Deep  
Breathing

Exercise

Journaling

Music

Helping  
Others

Time with  
Pets

# Supporting Children

## Positive Coping

### People in my World

- Hearts = people I love
- Red dots = people I trust
- Green dots = people I can talk to
- Blue dots = people I can hang-out with
- Star stickers = people who help me
- Band-Aids = people who are less helpful



## Supporting Children Positive Coping

### Activity Idea: Balloon Worries



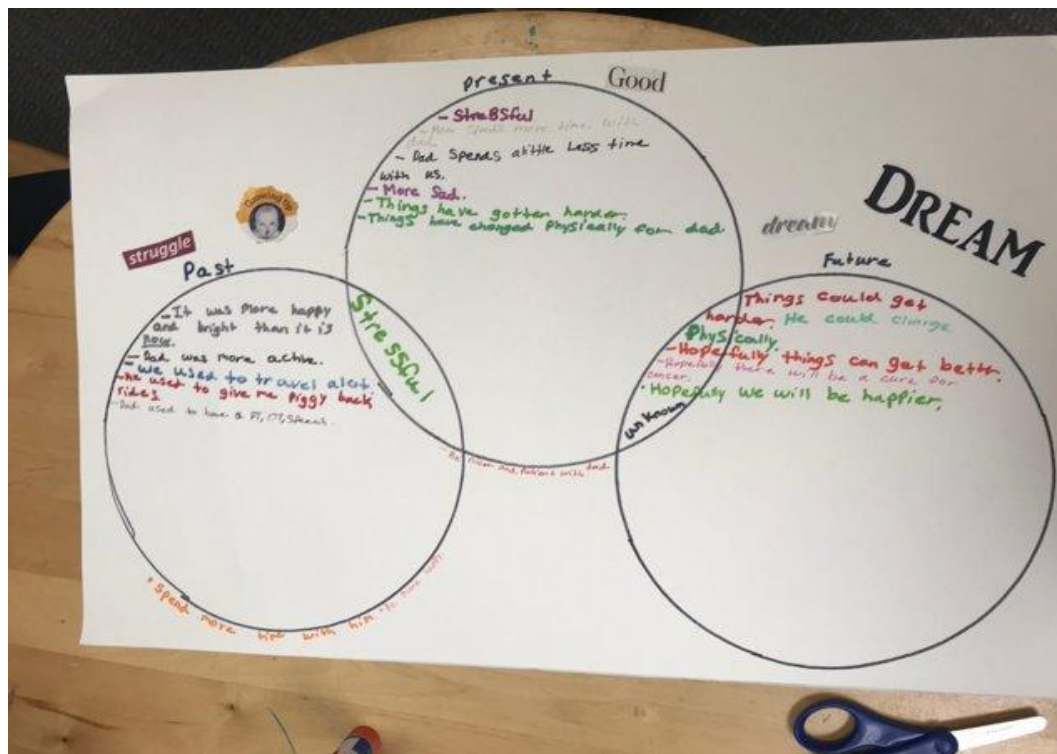
- Have each family member share a worry or strong feeling they have been experiencing and write it on the balloon
- Share something that helps them when they feel that emotion
- Tell them something a loved one could do for them when they see they are feeling that way
- Pop the worry or the emotion by stomping or poking the balloon

# Supporting Children Positive Coping

## Activities for Coping with Change Then, Now and Tomorrow

Questions or Prompts:

- What did your life look like before your parent's diagnosis? Now?
- What do you think your life/world will be like in the future?
- What are things you had in the past in your family that are now different?
- What changes in your life would you like to see in the future?
- What were the challenges you faced in the past? Now?



Wonders & Worries

# Supporting Children

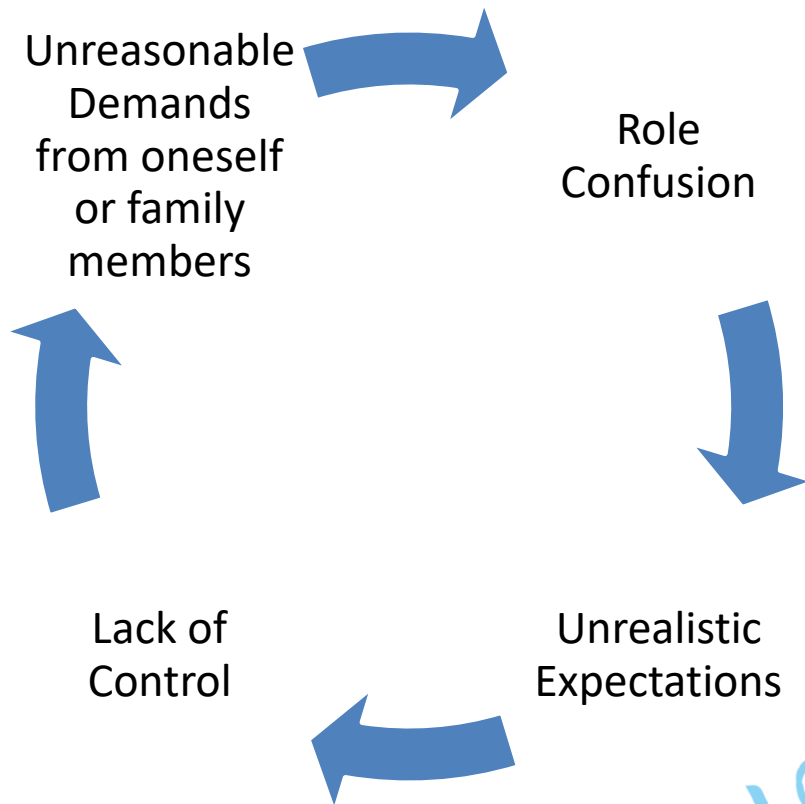
## Books That Encourage Positive Coping

- Chill & Spill by Steffanie Lorig & Jeanean Jacobs
- Ink About It by Art with Heart
- Wreck This Journal by Keri Smith
- Draw it Out by Art with Heart
- Don't Pop Your Cork on Monday by Adolf
- A Terrible Thing Happened by Margaret M. Holmes & Sasha J. Mudlaff
- Be the Boss of Your Stress by Timothy Culbert & Rebecca Kajander

# Supporting Caregivers

## Positive Coping

### Cause of Burnout



### How to Prevent Burnout

- Selfcare is not a luxury but a necessity
- Talk to a professional
- Join a caregiver support group
- Don't be afraid to ask for help
- Accept your feelings of frustration or anger regarding your new responsibilities.
  - Grace and forgiveness

# Supporting Caregivers

## Positive Coping

- Be Real – with yourself and your family
  - ✓ Be genuine, express what is true
- Lower the Bar – adjust expectations
  - ✓ Prioritize, say Yes to Help when possible, let go of perfection
- Be Present – focus on connection
  - ✓ Disconnect from screens, give the gift of your attention
- Find Peace – take mini coping breaks
  - ✓ Breathe, utilize relaxation techniques and mindfulness, develop weekly mantras

# Putting it all together

## Diagnosis

- Being Honest
- Discussing role of well parent
- Current & new support system

## Treatment and Hospital Visits

- Should child visit? If so, when?
- Preparing for visit
  - Explain the hospital equipment and noises

## Coming Home from the Hospital

- Preparing children for routine change and physical change
- Having realistic expectations
  - Sick parent
  - Well Parent
  - Children

## Ongoing Chronic That get Worse Over the Years

- Coping with permanent changes
- Coping with partial loss of a parent
- New normal
- School Counselor / Teacher



# WonderCast Parent Podcast



Julie May, CCLS  
W&W WonderCast Host

- Professional discussion on common parenting issue that occur when a household experiences an illness or injury
- 20–30-minute episodes which address a specific area of concern
- New episodes are posted twice a month on our Website, Spotify, and Apple Podcast!



# W&W2GO APP for Parents

## W&W2Go App for Parents

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on Google Play



W&W2Go for Parents on  
the Apple Store

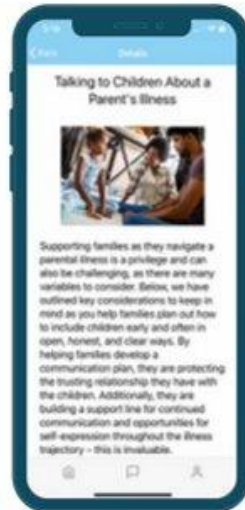


Wonders & Worries

# W&W2GO APP for Professionals

## W&W2Go App for Professionals

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Wonders & Worries

# Contact

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