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Young Adults Caring for a Parent With Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 07/2014

Key Messages:

- Talking with your parent about his or her needs and expectations, your availability to help and your limitations, and your feelings will help prevent misunderstandings and tension in your relationship.
- Setting up a system to organize your caregiving responsibilities and asking for help from family and friends can make the tasks seem more manageable.
- Taking care of your own emotional health, physical needs, and personal responsibilities will make you a more effective caregiver.

Many young adults who have a parent with cancer feel torn between their focus on establishing themselves in the world and their duty and desire to help a parent who is facing a serious illness. While caregiving can be a rewarding way to reconnect with parents, it can also change a phase of life that is typically marked by exploration and freedom.

For example, while the lives of your friends continue to revolve around careers, relationships, and recreational activities, your concerns are likely focused on how to provide support with limited time and resources. As a result, you may feel isolated as you try to help your parent while dealing with your own emotional response to the situation and managing your own responsibilities.

The suggestions discussed below could help to ease the burden you may feel.

Communicate

Communication with your parent and any siblings you have is particularly important during an illness. You may feel uncomfortable discussing difficult topics, wanting to avoid those conversations. However, talking about your shared concerns and hopes may provide some relief, generating a deeper sense of connection and mutual support. In addition, it is helpful to establish an understanding of expectations.

If you find it difficult to get started, consider involving a friend of the family, a relative, or even a doctor, nurse, or counselor to help guide communication.

Consider these tips when planning for such discussions:

- Avoid discussing concerns about the illness and plans for managing treatment during a crisis when time is rushed, if possible.
- Ask your parent about treatment wishes, and respect those wishes, acknowledging your parent's right to control decisions about his or her care.
- Discuss how finances will be handled.
- Establish expectations about visits, responsibility for care, and other matters, and agree to review these expectations regularly to evaluate whether they are realistic.
- Write a letter to express your thoughts if you find it difficult to bring up these topics; this may help set the stage for easier in-person discussions.

Manage caregiving responsibilities

Once you have learned what type of help your parent needs and wants, set up a system to organize your responsibilities. To start, create a list of tasks. These may include participating in medical and physical care, addressing legal and financial issues, and communicating with friends and family. The following list provides some steps to consider:

- Request a meeting with your parent's health care team to get clear, accurate information about your parent's illness and treatment. The doctor will need permission from your parent to share such information. It may be best to accompany your parent to a scheduled appointment.
- Ensure that the doctor has your full contact information included as part of your parent's file in case of an emergency.
- Keep a list of key contacts, including the doctor, nurse, social worker, pharmacist, and emergency room, with you at all times, and distribute it to others who will provide care.
- Make copies of your parent's legal documents, such as an [advance directive](#) [3], a power of attorney for health care, and a power of attorney for property; health insurance cards; and relevant financial information.
- Have a close friend or family member help organize a support network of family, friends, and neighbors that can assist your parent with household tasks, grocery shopping, transportation to doctors' appointments, and other needs. It may help to write down these specific tasks so that when people ask, you are prepared. To keep all of the helpers updated and organized, some people set up an email list or webpage or use one of many [websites](#) [4] that make this process easier.

Learn more about [how to manage common caregiving responsibilities](#) [5].

Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Most friends and relatives are willing to help, particularly when given specific suggestions. Learn more about [sharing responsibilities](#) [6] and [other caregiving options](#) [7].

Seek personal support

It is important to recognize that taking care of your own emotional health, physical needs, and personal responsibilities makes you a more effective caregiver. Set aside time to step back from the role reversal, allow others to do the caregiving, and interact with your parent as simply a son

or daughter. In addition, as much as possible, continue your friendships, romantic relationships, work, and whatever activities refresh you. Investing in yourself will give you more energy and the ability to be truly present and available for your parent.

However, it is often difficult to maintain that sort of balance because of time limitations and the complex emotions you may experience. During this time, take advantage of resources for support and find ways to cope with stress. Some ideas include the following:

- Check with your employer's human resources manager about the Family Medical Leave Act, Employee Assistance Program, and other benefits.
- Talk with a friend, clergy member, or [counselor](#) [8] to help you cope with your experience.
- Join an online or in-person [support group](#) [9].
- [Write in a journal](#) [10] to express your feelings and document your journey.
- When people offer to help you or your parent, say yes.
- Plan activities with your parent that are unrelated to his or her cancer.
- Spend time with supportive friends, even if you have to scale back these activities while you juggle other responsibilities.
- Maintain your health through regular physical checkups.
- Exercise regularly.
- Listen to soothing or uplifting music.

Learn more about [how to care for yourself while caregiving](#) [11].

More Information

[Caregiver Support](#) [12]

[Sharing Responsibilities](#) [6]

[Long-Distance Caregiving](#) [13]

Additional Resources

[CancerCare: Young Adults as Caregivers](#) [14]

[Family Caregiver Alliance: Caregiving Issues and Strategies](#) [15]

[National Cancer Institute: When Someone You Love is Being Treated for Cancer](#) [16]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/caregiver-support/young-adults-caring-parent-cancer>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25278>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25236>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25032>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25029>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

- [10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31561>
- [11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25031>
- [12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25009>
- [13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25234>
- [14] http://www.cancercare.org/publications/141-young_adults_as_caregivers
- [15] <http://caregiver.org/caregiving-issues-and-strategies>
- [16] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/when-someone-you-love-is-treated>