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When Mommy Has Cancer

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My son, Harrison, was almost 3 1/2 and his little sister, Evelyn, was just 5 months old when I was diagnosed with Stage III colorectal cancer at age 33. We were still adjusting to the busy life of a family of four and getting everyone's schedules straight.

The day I found out I had cancer was a blur. I remember thinking I would let myself have a pity party for a few hours, but when it was time to get the kids from school, I had to suck it up and act normally. I did OK that first night—dinner, baths and story time as usual. Harrison and I sang his special good night song, and I rocked Evelyn in her chair. I went to bed early and, surprisingly, slept like a rock.

But the next morning was hard. I woke up to realize the nightmare was actually real, and when I walked into my son's room to wake him up for school, I lost it. Seeing his worry-free sleeping face and knowing that his innocent world was about to be turned upside down just tore me apart.

The days that followed were busy with diagnostic biopsies and scopes. Cancer likes to keep you busy and take over your life right away. We already had tickets to a baseball game for that first weekend after I found out, and we decided to still go. It was my first lesson in life with cancer—keep up your normal plans as much as you can. It turned out to be a great day full of distractions and smiles. I told myself that from that day on, I would do everything in my power not to let cancer take away their fun childhood memories.

"Hey, buddy, Mommy and Daddy have something to tell you…"

That was the start of the hardest sentence I ever uttered to my son. I was scheduled to have surgery the next day. Now it was becoming real. I could tell Harrison was already sensing something was going on, so I knew it was time to talk with him about it. But how? How do you assure them everything will be OK when it very well might not be?

I have always encouraged my patients to be honest with their children when talking about cancer, but facing that conversation myself made me question everything. We explained that I have a very different kind of owie in my tummy that's called cancer. I told him the doctors will have to take it out with surgery and I will have to take a strong special medicine called chemo that will make me feel pretty yucky.

I answered his questions the best I could and told him I loved him very much. He didn’t bring it up again until that night as I tucked him into bed. He told me that once I was finished with my special medicine, I could have a sleepover with him in his boys-only fort, just me and him. And there it was—the moment I knew I had no choice but to beat this. I had to be here for these kids now and for many years to come.

My goal was to keep things as normal as possible for my kids. The child life specialist at my cancer center explained that “normalizing the abnormal” and maintaining routines and expectations brings children comfort and a feeling of safety in the midst of illness.

Harrison adjusted really well. There was a revolving door of visitors at our home and no normal schedule. There were last-minute changes of plans that led to disappointment. He had to be woken up in the middle of the night more than once to be tossed in a car to bring Mommy to the emergency department. He had to learn to keep his hands washed and that Mommy couldn’t always get kisses on the mouth or pick him up. He witnessed Mommy pulling over on the side of the road to throw up, saw the lineup of pill bottles on the bathroom sink—the abnormal became normal. He liked to be a helper and feel included, giving me checkups and feeling my chest port through my skin. He loved to visit when I was in the hospital and even got to help me ring the bell at the end of treatment.

I am no expert, and every kid is different, but I have learned a lot as a cancer patient and a mom of small kids. I’ve learned that they might not always know how to talk about their fears or what questions to ask, but if you listen closely, you can pick up on what they really need in the middle of all the chaos.

I love both of my children deeply, but you probably notice I didn’t mention my sweet daughter very much. Mostly because she was so little when I was diagnosed that I didn’t have to agonize over what to tell her or the questions and fears she might have had. She didn’t know any different. Having a mommy who couldn’t carry her car seat up the stairs or who lay down on the floor as she played with her blocks was simply normal.

I was so crippled with the fear of dying that I think I unconsciously held her at a distance…just in case. I was mad at cancer, mad that it showed up right after I realized my dream of completing my family, mad that it made me stop breast-feeding my baby and left me too exhausted to have those sweet late-night bonding moments, mad that everyone else around me had to suffer because of my diagnosis.

Right now, I’m cancer-free and we’re back to life as usual—for the most part. There are still moments that take my breath away. “Momma, can we go to Disney World when I’m 10?” (I hope I’ll get to go too.) “Momma, when I have kids, I’m going to have a beard.” (I so badly want to see the people they become and the families they make.) “Momma, do you promise you’ll be my mommy forever?” (Sigh. I sure hope so, buddy.) As harsh as that reality is, I truly appreciate the perspective I’ve been given—it makes me realize how special those everyday moments really are.

No matter what the future holds, I know my kids will be just fine. I’m certain they will both grow up to make their own beautiful mark on the world. And every day, I pray like crazy I’ll be here to see it.

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