



WHEN MOMMY IS

sick

... THE FAMILY IS FORCED TO FACE TOUGH REALITIES, AS FRIGHTENING AND CONFUSING AS IT CAN BE, THERE ARE PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE TO HELP THE FAMILY DEAL WITH THE CRISIS. WE TALK WITH EXPERTS AND MOMS WHO HAVE BEEN THERE AND SAY A STRAIGHTFORWARD APPROACH AND WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT HELP MAKE COPING EASIER FOR EVERYONE.

BY PAULA ANDRUSO

When busy mom Jen Singer was diagnosed with lymphoma, her first thoughts were not only about taking care of her own health, but how she would be able to continue caring for her family.

"AT THE SAME TIME I was getting a diagnosis, I'm class mom, soccer coach and we went away to Washington, D.C., for spring break," says the New Jersey mom of Nicholas, then 10, and Christopher, who was 8. "It was brutal."

When a family member becomes seriously ill, it affects the entire family. But when that family member is mom, it can turn everyone's world upside down. Whether it's cancer, multiple sclerosis, heart disease or other conditions, a serious illness takes an emotional toll on the whole household.

According to experts, there are an estimated 25 million women in the United States under age 55 living with a serious or chronic illness

—including cancer, multiple sclerosis, lupus and diabetes—while raising children, according to Kristine Breese, the author of *Cereal for Dinner: Strategies, Shortcuts and Sanity for Moms Battling Illness*.

Experts and moms who have been there say a straightforward approach and a willingness to be helped make coping easier for everyone.

"There's a whole host of different family issues that can come up when mom is diagnosed with a serious illness," says Dr. Freya Schnabel, professor, Department of Surgery, Division of Breast Surgery at New York University Langone Medical Center.

One of the first issues for mom is how and what to tell their children about the illness. Despite the instinct to protect their children from crisis, insiders

agree it's best to tell the truth, albeit in a careful and deliberate way.

Schnabel says most children are able to recognize the signs of a serious illness, so it's better to be truthful.

"Children know when something's wrong; they know there's tension, mom isn't looking right or she's unhappy," Schnabel says. "Giving them some appropriate information is better than letting them fantasize, because whatever they're imagining in their head is much worse than the real situation."

Singer agrees and says she was as upfront with her boys as possible. "When they're under 10 they just want to know if they can catch it and if they caused it, so it's important to explain that to them," she says.

Schnabel says it's important to communicate in an age-appropriate way so kids can understand, to speak confidently and not to over-inform with unnecessary information.

"Kids are really good at letting you know when you've said enough," she explains. "When they walk away or turn it off, you know you've said enough."

Keeping up a charade can also be draining for moms. "It saps a lot of energy to keep your story straight and keep yourself looking good to fool your kids," Schnabel says. "That's a lot of energy that's better devoted to getting better."

That dedication to getting better requires moms to do something else that goes against their instincts—putting themselves first.

"You have to be selfish because your health is

number one," says Singer, who founded parenting-withcancer.com to help other parents in the same situation. "You need to get better so the whole family can get better."

Singer says that while caring for yourself and your kids is indeed difficult, the key is making sure you give them as much as you can without adversely affecting yourself, which can be done in part by scheduling treatments, doctor appointments and rest during times when the kids are at school or other activities, and preparing for the days you know will be rough.

"I knew that the closer I got to the next chemo, the better I would feel. So I made sure I spent more time with the kids then, because I knew the first few days after chemo I would be worthless," she says.

One key to putting yourself first is to accept the fact that even though you're a mom, you don't always have to be the one to meet your kids' needs, says Dr. Wendy Harpham, M.D., a cancer survivor and mom from Richardson, Texas.

Harpham says letting her kids know that their physical and emotional needs were going to be met no matter what was comforting to them, and realizing she was not the one who had to do it had the same effect for her.

"I realized my obligation, my need as a mother, was to ensure my children's needs were going to be met and that I didn't necessarily have to be the one to meet them [those needs]," she says. "That was a very liberating insight."

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And there are several support networks that include family and friends that can help keep your home-life going.

"It's hard to do because you don't want to feel like a burden or taking advantage of helpful people, but most of the time they really want to help," says Jeanna Waldroup of Spruce Pine, N.C., who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when her daughter was one. She says she gets lots of support from her family, friends and church.

"If I'm not feeling well or they know I'm going through a hard time, they help me a lot with meals and anything else I need," she says.

Being specific about what you need is important, Singer adds, because "if you don't define what you need, people don't know what to do for you."

She says volunteer websites such as CareCalendar or CaringBridge are great ways to communicate and can be mutually beneficial.

"Even if it's something as simple as 'I'm really nauseous, can you pick up something for me?' people love to help because they feel like doing something makes a difference," she says. "It's as much for them as it is for you."

ADVICE FOR FAMILIES

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS. Moms typically the driving force in keeping everyone on schedule with chores, errands and activities. Family members should be prepared to take over those tasks.

EVERYONE NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED. The family should sit down and divide up the things that need to get done around the house and outside the house. Assign laundry duties, cooking, cleaning and grocery shopping. Everyone who is physically capable of taking on a responsibility should.

DON'T BE SHY ABOUT ASKING FOR HELP. Friends and family want to help during this time of need. Accept their help. It makes them feel involved in helping their sister or friend, and it gives the family a break.

DON'T FORGET TO SAY THANKS. When people help, make sure that they know their gesture or good deed is appreciated.

TAKE CARE OF MOM. Be as patient and comforting as you can to her during this time. She needs to know that the wheels are not falling off because she's not there to direct traffic.