



CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ABOUT DYING

Whatever the prognosis, talk with your children truthfully, balancing hope for the best (cure, recovery or improvement) with acceptance (of uncertainty around the disease).

If your children ask you if you are going to die, or what will happen to you (or them) if you die, it is an opening for connection and communication. Ask them why they want to know, or if there is anything special they are wondering or worrying about. Remember that your children need to know that they will be looked after no matter what happens.

You can encourage your children not to worry alone.

- Reassure your child that it is normal to feel frightened by the news.
- Let your child know right at the start that it is normal for children to wonder if their parent is going to die.
- Let them know that it is OK to talk about death and ask questions.
- It is a good idea to address the topic from the beginning, so that you and your children do not have to be on your guard.

It can be helpful to develop a framework for your children's questions about dying that includes reality, hope, and reassurance:

- *Acknowledge the possibility* (You could say, for example, that you don't know if you are going to die from your illness and you hope not, or that it is unlikely, and that some people do die from cancer, but most people do not die from it.)
- *Reassure your children that you want to get better.* (You could say something like, "I will do everything possible to take care of myself and have the best possible treatment, so that I can live for as long as and as well as I can.")
- *Reinforce that you will keep them informed about how you are doing.* (You could say that you are not dying right now, and that you will tell them if you are getting worse.)
- *Offer hope.* (You could say that you hope your child will be able to put aside their worries and continue with their activities and life as though it will all work out well in the end.)

(Adapted from Reaching out to your Children When Comes to Your Family. Slakov, J., (2007) BC Cancer Agency, Vancouver)

This is part of a series of FACT Sheets developed by the Patient Family and Counselling Departments, BC Cancer Agency. For further contact information, please access our provincial website at: www.bccancer.bc.ca