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You and Your Teen

Parenting siblings of the chronically ill child

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In my last article, I advised couples on how to cope when one of their kids becomes profoundly ill. This week I'm looking at what parents of a sick child can do to be the best parents possible to their other children.

A number of years ago I counseled two teens "John" and "Holly" whose 12-year-old brother "Ryan" had just been diagnosed with cancer. They were devastated by the news and wanted to turn to their parents for support and reassurance, but had chosen not to.

Upon meeting their parents, it was clear why. They were overwhelmed and exhausted by their grief and the stress of taking care of Ryan, and they had next to nothing left to give. In fact, they hadn't even stopped to con-

sider that John and Holly might need more emotional support. After all, both were good students and had plenty of friends to lean on. They figured they were OK.

In fairness, John and Holly hadn't stood up, waved their arms, and shouted, "I'm upset and need attention, too." Doing so would likely have left them feeling selfish and guilty for taking up their parents' time.

Had their parents been able to be more attentive, they would likely have noticed that their kids were struggling. John had complained of stomachaches and Holly was tired all the time. The grades of both kids had fallen significantly. When their parents recognized this, they were shocked, and even though it was clear that they felt burdened, they promised to make changes.

Although your teens will probably tell you they're OK

and don't want to burden you, it's crucial for you to make time for them on a regular basis. John and Holly went to breakfast with their father on alternate Saturdays. John enjoyed running errands with his mom, and they used this time to talk. Holly and her mother watched shows and movies on Netflix. Both teens wanted more time, but they understood that circumstances wouldn't allow for it.

When you're tapped out but know that your teens still need attention, it's crucial to ask for help from family and friends. Keep in mind that those close to you want to help and only need to be asked. Perhaps your teen's aunts and uncles can play a more active role. Or maybe they can spend extra time with their friends' families. In John's case, he played basketball in school and was especially close with his coach, who asked him to help with his son's soccer team. Holly confided in her favorite teacher who let her TA and hang out after school to "work."

Over time, it's normal for the stress of a sick child to wear down a family. What were previously strong relationships can become strained, and people often respond by taking distance. When you notice this, insist on spending time together as a family, in which you both have fun and air out concerns. When John and Holly did this with their parents, the family was able to laugh together for the first time in months – and speak honestly about their struggles and fears about Ryan's health.

Sadly, Ryan died before long, and the family stopped counseling and moved away abruptly to get a "fresh start." As there are few things more difficult on siblings and parents than the death of a child, it goes without saying that their adjustment had to have been overwhelmingly difficult. I can't know for sure, but I'm hopeful that the steps they took during their counseling to strengthen and improve their relationships have served them as they've settled into family life without Ryan.

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