

What to do when a child is diagnosed with a serious chronic illness

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Not long ago, my wife and I learned that our son could have an illness that would have left him with profound health problems and likely a shortened life.

After extensive and painful testing, we were relieved to learn that it isn't the case. Nonetheless, it was a terrifying couple of weeks, as we faced the possibility that our lives as parents would change drastically.

Given a few weeks' time to let my blood pressure return to normal, I've reflected on what parents can do to help themselves cope, when faced with terrifying news about their child's health.

Shock is natural and the tendency is to blame yourself or your partner and look at what you could or should have done

differently. Try your best to avoid this, as it's not going to change the news and will likely make things worse.

After the initial shock wears off and you start facing a future they you hadn't expected, it's natural to turn to your partner for support. While this is crucial, be aware that you may not get all of what you need from him or her. Your spouse is also coping with overwhelming feelings and likely has limited emotional support to provide.

Rather than draining your partner completely, turn to others for support. If you feel hesitant because you don't like feeling needy or asking for help, remember that your friends and family want to help. Your already difficult job as a parent just got exponentially more challenging, and you're going to need assistance.

This is particularly important when you and your partner hit

those points of frustration and exhaustion that you have to take a break or you're going to break. Again, your family and friends want to help. Be it two hours to go to the gym or a weekend getaway, it's crucial to take advantage of their offers. If you don't get time to recharge and refresh, it'll be next to impossible to be the kind of parent you'd want to be.

It's also important to keep in mind the need to take care of yourself. When first faced with the possibility that my son could be sick, I spent way too many hours doing research on all of the ins and outs of what he could have. Although I quickly became an expert on signs, symptoms, and statistics, I neglected other aspects of my life. I kept working, but everything else fell away. For a few days, I stopped exercising, eating well and sleeping enough.

Be aware that there will probably be times when you feel that

your friends and family can't understand what you're going through, and you'll need more. When this happens, turn to online and/or in-person support groups. By sharing with others going through what you're experiencing, you'll likely feel less alone and more supported.

Despite all efforts to take care of your needs, realize that there might be times when it isn't enough. If this happens, it's often helpful to seek the support of a professional.

Having had a taste of how profoundly a terrifying diagnosis can affect individuals and relationships, I'm clear that there's no need to bear the burden alone. Although this won't change a diagnosis, taking good care of yourself by seeking the support of others can help you be the best parent possible. And this is all your child can ask.

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