

How to help a parent who is managing illness in the family



SUPPORTING FAMILIES
WITH A SERIOUSLY ILL CHILD

Parents of a seriously ill child can experience difficult emotions such as guilt and anger, and depression. Coupled with the practical stresses of caring for the child and their siblings, this can take a toll on their mental health and ability to cope. If someone close to you is living in the shadow of serious illness, you may want to help but feel powerless to do so.

Here are some suggestions of how you can help support them:

- **Keep** in touch with parents who have a seriously ill child. It is fine not to know what to say. Saying that you don't know what to say is always better than not keeping in touch at all.
- **Know** that a parent with a seriously ill child will have different needs at different points in their child's illness. It can take time for a parent to recognise that they could benefit from your help, so offer support more than once, and don't be offended if they decline your offer.
- **Make** a concrete offer of help, rather than a general offer. Ask if there are any practical tasks you could take on. Helping with housework, meals or school drop-offs, can help parents better manage their day-to-day tasks and give them more time to look after their mental health.
- **Remember** that there may be many obstacles to accessing mental health support: a child's age and diagnosis, practical barriers, location, culture and stigma, fear of judgement. Perhaps you can help to research or source options for support that are available?
- **Be aware** that social media can bring particular challenges for mental health. Sharing updates about a child's illness can be a way for a parent to keep in touch with friends, but over time the 'likes' or responses may tail off, and parents may find it painful to see updates from others who are not in the same situation.
- **Be natural.** Telling someone it's OK to feel how they feel is powerful in itself.

- **Take** a non-judgemental approach.
- **Be aware** of their needs before your own. One parent said *"You find yourself comforting other people. You're in the supermarket and Joseph is in wheelchair with no hair, and you bump into an old colleague or an old friend who hasn't heard what's happened... Everything becomes a big ordeal."*
- **Try** small acts of generosity, like cooking and delivering a meal to the family, or sending a small, thoughtful gift which can really help to lift a person's mood.
- **Keep in touch.** One parent told us *"Lots of friends disappear. Not deliberately. But things like the WhatsApp group for going to the pub – you get taken off because people know you're in hospital and you can't go."*
- **Donate** to Rainbow Trust so that more families can receive much needed support from a Family Support Worker. Visit rainbowtrust.org.uk for more information or if you would like to donate and help us to reach more families.

The Role of a Rainbow Trust Family Support Worker

Rainbow Trust Family Support Workers are there for the entire family; in the home, at hospital, in the community, whenever and wherever our support is needed. They provide both emotional and practical support. This can include:

- keeping a sick child entertained with one-to-one support
- spending time with healthy brothers and sisters so they do not feel forgotten
- being present with parents as they go through their child's diagnosis and treatment
- helping around the home, taking the pressure off parents
- providing transport to and from appointments
- offering bereavement support if needed.

You can share these tips with someone you think could benefit from them, or visit rainbowtrust.org.uk to find out more about the eligibility criteria for our services.

#ParentsMatter

rainbowtrust.org.uk/parentsmatter