

# Helping Your Children Cope with Your Cancer



Your illness involves the whole family. Children are affected by everything that happens in the family. Therefore, your children know something serious is happening even if you haven't told them yet. Children are very resilient and can often handle more difficult situations than we may expect.

— *It helps your children cope  
when you tell them the truth.* —



Children's needs vary according to their age. The way you talk with them about your cancer needs to be adjusted to match each child's age and maturity level. The information below outlines different approaches for three age groups: 2-6 year olds, 7-12 year olds, and teenagers. However, regardless of age, children share some very basic needs:

- to have their physical and emotional needs met,
- to understand what is happening to their world at their own level, and
- to be reassured that they will be cared for no matter what happens.

## ■ TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

It is very important to let your children know you are willing to talk about your illness and listen to their concerns. Even though they may not bring up your illness, they are thinking about it. It is helpful for your child to know:

- that you have an illness,
- that the name of the illness is cancer (it helps to use the word "cancer"),
- that you are working with your doctors to treat the cancer.

Sometimes it is hard to talk about these topics. You may be afraid that you will upset your child emotionally. However, it is important to provide children with an opportunity to talk about your illness. If your children sense that talking about your illness upsets you, they will hesitate to ask questions that are important.

To help you stay calm, it is wise to have a plan in place. Pick a time to talk when there are few distractions. Plan for a brief break in your conversation if you sense you are becoming too emotional. For example, take a moment to get a drink of water or a snack. When you feel a little calmer, you can continue the conversation.

Don't feel that you have to cover every detail in one conversation. It may help to have more frequent, but shorter conversations about your illness.

### **Ages 2 to 6**

Children this age often have three general concerns when a parent is ill. Young children worry about who will take care of them when a parent is ill. They also worry that they somehow caused the illness, even though they did not. Lastly, they wonder if the illness is contagious and if they can "catch" it from you. It helps to discuss each of these particular worries in a straight-forward manner. Don't wait for them to ask. Here are some examples of phrases you may want to use.

*"You will always be taken care of even if I am sick"*

*"Nothing you ever did or thought made me get cancer"*

*"You cannot get cancer from me"*

One way to bring up a difficult topic is to make a general statement such as *"Sometimes children worry about (fill in a concern your child might have). Tell me what you have been thinking about that."* By bringing up the topic, you are giving your child permission to discuss his or her concerns with you.

It often takes several conversations over an extended period of time to reassure your child. Even though your discussions may be brief, it is important to try to address your child's concerns. It may also help to use play activities and drawings to bring out your child's feelings.

### **Ages 7 to 12**

Children in this age group are very interested in bodies. You can expect that they may ask very direct questions about what is wrong with you and what will be done about it. Try to tell the truth and give direct answers without embarrassment. At this age, they may also benefit by knowing they will be taken care of and that they cannot catch the cancer from you.

### **Teenagers**

Teens generally want more information than younger children. They appreciate knowing you are open to their questions and concerns. But be prepared that your teen may not want to talk with you as much as you would like. If your teen prefers not to talk with you, try to find another person such as a family member, friend or professional counselor. This person should understand the situation and be able to encourage your teen to share his or her thoughts and feelings.

### **For children of all ages**

Keep communication lines open. Answer their questions, but do not overwhelm them with more information than they ask for. Encourage your children to express their feelings with phrases such as "*How is that for you?*" Let them know that unhappy feelings such as anger and disappointment are normal. Try holding regular family meetings to keep everyone informed and talking.



## ■ INVOLVING YOU CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE

As you talk with your children about your illness, they may want to know how they can help when you are ill. Try to identify ways with your child that they can help. For example, one way children can help is to do their best in school. Another way to involve children is to allow them to select household chores that they can do. Remember to praise them for their help. Encourage your children to assist you in age-appropriate ways.

Here are some ideas:

### **Ages 2 to 6**

Give them little jobs that involve your comfort and care such as bringing you a pillow or a drink of water when you need to take medications.

### **Ages 7 to 12**

Involve your child in listing and choosing the chores that need to be done: washing dishes, house cleaning, taking out the trash, pet care, etc.

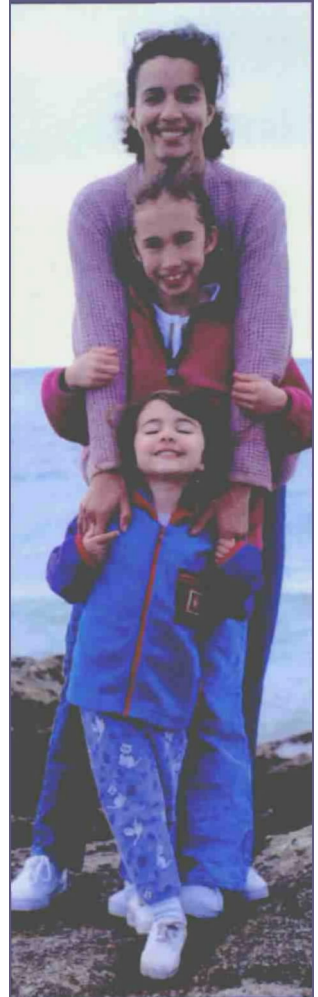
## Teenagers

Have an open discussion with your teen about what needs to be done and how she or he may be able to help. Some teens may be willing to do chores such as cooking, shopping, and watching younger siblings. Others may be willing to help in different ways.

## ■ HELPING YOUR CHILD ADJUST

It is often helpful to tell children that an illness can affect everyone in the family in one way or another. Let them know that there may be some changes in your family routines, but that you will try to keep them to a minimum. Help your children identify the losses that may accompany your illness. Give them permission to express disappointment about losses such as a cancelled trip or the fact you may not be able to go to their school or sports activities.

Try to spend time every day with each child alone and without distraction. Use a phone answering machine to decrease the interruptions during family time. Extra support and hugs are helpful.



Help your child maintain hope. Find time for fun and laughter. Encourage physical activities such as bike rides or nature hikes. Physical exercise is a good way to relieve built-up tension.

## **Ages 2 to 6**

Keep other caregivers to a minimum if possible. Increase your child's sense of security by maintaining a consistent schedule. Bath-time and bedtime are often good times to connect with younger children.

## **Ages 7 to 12**

Continue normal activities and routines; give regular updates on your condition; keep the school informed.

## **Teenagers**

Allow time with friends; reward mature behavior with privileges; make sure they have someone to whom they can talk; keep the school informed.

## **■ RECOGNIZING WHEN A CHILD NEEDS HELP**

Children, like adults, will have good and bad days. Don't worry about an occasional bad day. However, you should seek assistance from a professional if you see problem behaviors that do not go away such as:

- Major changes or disturbances in sleeping or eating
- Returning to behaviors that your child had previously outgrown
- Falling grades or failure in school
- Expressing fears that don't seem to go away
- Being very quiet or withdrawn and refusing to talk

## **■ CONCLUSIONS**

When a parent is seriously ill, the children's treatment is part of the parent's treatment. There are many ways to parent; don't expect to be perfect. Every day provides a new opportunity to handle things better. Remember, mistakes made with love are easier to correct.

## ■ FOR MORE INFORMATION

Here are two books that are a great resource for parents and families:

- When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring For Your Children by Wendy Schlessel Harpham, MD. Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2004. Includes a companion book for children, Becky and the Worry Cup.

This is a book for families written by a woman who is a mother, physician and recurrent cancer survivor. It has advice for parents trying to raise normal, healthy children while they struggle with this disease. The children's book tells the story of a 7-year-old girl's experiences with her mother's cancer. (\$14.95)

- How to Help Children through a Parent's Serious Illness by Kathleen McCue, MA. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994.

This easy-to-read handbook, written by a child life specialist, gives practical, concrete suggestions to parents for dealing with their children during their own health crisis. (\$13.95)



Helping Families Through Research

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## What members say about Gilda's Club Metro Detroit:

### Wellness Groups

"This group is not only NOT depressing,  
it is vastly entertaining at times."

### Family Groups

"When my wife was diagnosed with cancer  
I felt like a failure,  
like something got past my guard.  
Now I know I'm not the only one that  
feels this way."

### Workshops

"Coming to Gilda's Club sure beats  
staying at home and worrying about cancer.  
When I'm painting,  
I even forget I have cancer."

### Noogieland

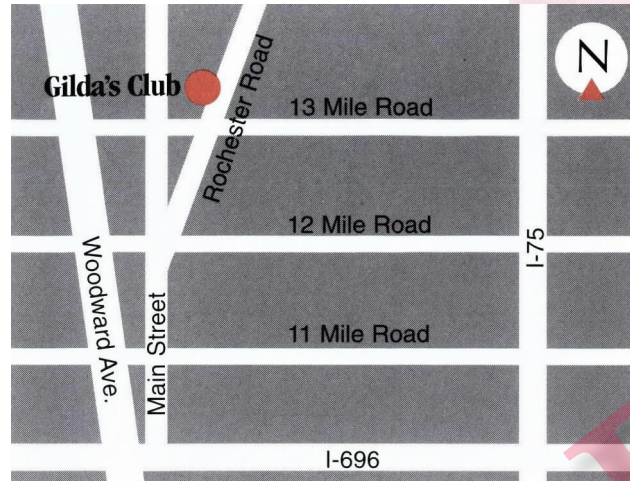
"Finally some place about  
cancer that's fun!"

### Potluck Parties

"When I'm out of town, I miss 'soup and  
group' at Gilda's Club."

### Gilda Radner

"A cancer support community  
helped me regain control over my life  
and reclaim my gift for laughter."



For more information please contact:

### Gilda's Club Metro Detroit

3517 Rochester Road  
Royal Oak, MI 48073

Tel: 248.577.0800

Fax: 248.577.0898

[www.gildasclubdetroit.org](http://www.gildasclubdetroit.org)

### Our Mission

To create a community where men, women  
and children with all types of cancer  
and their families and friends  
can enhance the quality of their lives  
through support, networking and education.

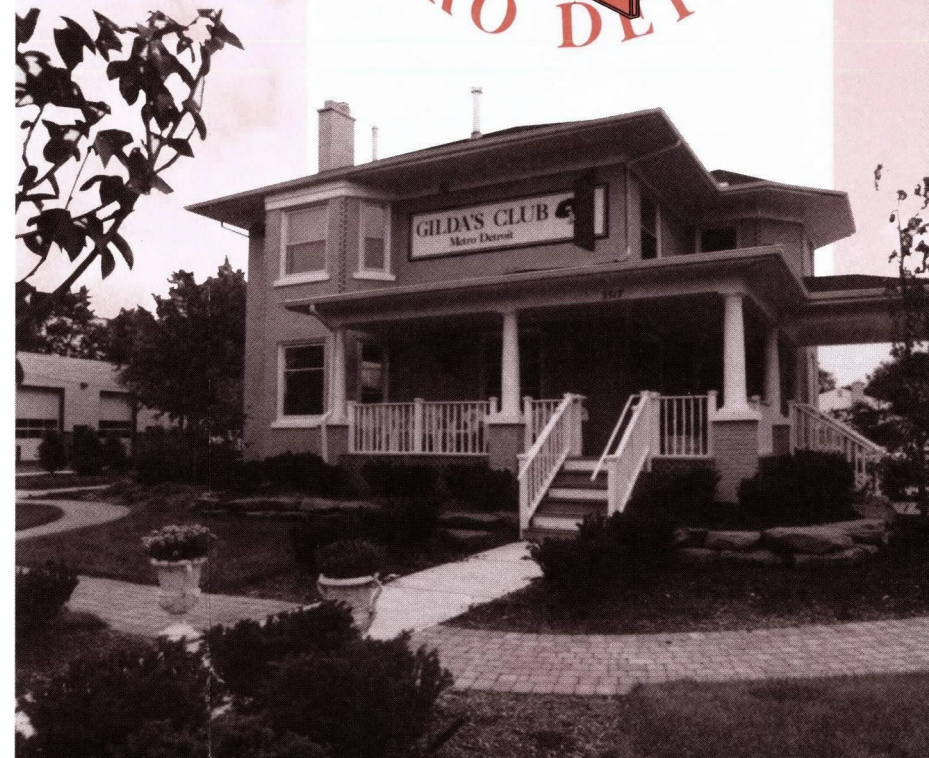
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PROSTHETICS • ORTHOTICS • HOME MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

Gilda's Club Metro Detroit is a 501(c)(3)  
non-profit corporation funded by gifts from  
individuals, foundations and corporations.

For anyone  
touched by  
cancer



# A Free Cancer Support Community

Gilda's Club Metro Detroit is a free, non-residential cancer support community in Royal Oak founded by eight committed women whose lives were touched by cancer. The signature "red door" to our beautifully restored clubhouse opened in 1998.



Living with cancer?  
Come as you are.™

## Gilda's Legacy

Gilda's Club is named in honor of the late comedian and former Detroiter Gilda Radner. Her dream was to create places where people living with cancer could gather to support one another and celebrate life. The dream found fulfillment with the opening of Gilda's Club New York City in 1995. Since that time, Gilda's Clubs have been opening around the world.

**Emotional and social support are as essential as medical care when cancer is in the family.**

Gilda's Club is a place where you can share the collective wisdom of experience, develop strategies for living with cancer and build friendships.

**When cancer happens, it happens to the entire family.**

That's why Gilda's Club welcomes men, women and children with all types of cancer and their families and friends into our unique support community.

## How to become a member:

Call and inquire about our weekly  
**New Member Meetings:**

**248.577.0800**

**W**elcome to our clubhouse! Make yourself comfortable in our warm, welcoming home-like setting. The program is offered FREE OF CHARGE and we are open six days a week. Once you are a member, you will receive our monthly calendar featuring clubhouse activities:

## Participate in one of our many GROUPS

- ❖ Weekly wellness and family groups facilitated by licensed/certified counseling professionals.
- ❖ Monthly networking groups for specific types of cancer and special interests.

## Come to our LECTURES & WORKSHOPS

- ❖ Our supper/lecture series "Food for Thought" by leading specialists on cancer-related topics of interest to our membership.
- ❖ Fun workshops including art, yoga, meditation, quilting and journaling.

**"You can let your hair down here, even if you don't have any."**

Gilda's Club Member

## Enjoy our SOCIAL EVENTS

- ❖ Monthly potluck parties and other social events including spa day, chicken soup night and more!

## Visit NOOGIELAND and join KID'S CLUB

- ❖ A unique play area and special activities for children and pre-teens affected by cancer.
- ❖ Receive "Noogie News" to find out about monthly activities.

## Join our TEEN CLUB

- ❖ Groups for teens affected by cancer to connect with other teens and to participate in many volunteer activities.

## Browse in our LIBRARY

- ❖ A varied selection of books on cancer and well-being.
- ❖ Internet and video access.



**FOCUS counseling referral sources:**

**Ann Arbor Area:**

**University of Michigan Depression Center**

734-936-4400

**<http://www.med.umich.edu/depression/>**

This is an excellent website with a lot of patient-oriented information, and you may want to encourage families to check it out. There is a page explaining what to expect when calling for an appointment (<http://www.med.umich.edu/depression/appointment.htm>).

**University of Michigan Sexual Health Clinic**

734-763-4963

**<http://www.med.umich.edu/socialwork/shcs/index.htm>**

The clinic has four therapists on staff, all women and all certified sex therapists. A patient/couple calls the central intake number, 734-763-4963, and leaves a confidential voice mail message indicating that they want to make an appointment. The person is called back by an intake coordinator. Then they are scheduled with one of the staff. The clinic can take Medicare, Mcare, and some other insurances, but unfortunately, not all insurances cover this service. Fees are \$150 for the initial evaluation, and then \$90/hour for therapy after that. The clinic does have a sliding scale, following the same procedures used in the department of psychiatry.

**Private Practice Masters-prepared Social Workers**

Ann Solomon, MSW

Ann Arbor Consultation Services

5331 Plymouth Road, Ann Arbor

734-996-9111 x211

Accepts Mcare, Care Choices and other insurances. Secretary can tell most people if therapy is likely to be covered by their insurance. If no insurance coverage, there is a sliding scale fee down to \$70/hour.

Susan Watts, MSW

Private practice

5260 Church Road, Ann Arbor

734-665-8510

She has seen 4-5 men with prostate cancer in her practice just this past year. Her special area of expertise is couples therapy which she also teaches to graduate students at the UM Psychological Clinic.

Sallie Foley says both are excellent therapists, knowledgeable about death, loss and illness-related issues. Both can take Mcare

**Beaumont Area:**

Bruce Hillengberg PhD

Clinical Psychologist

Works at Beaumont Hospital Cancer Center

25 years experience in health psychology

Deals with a variety of issues related to health and illness,  
individual issues, family issues, sexual health, as well as anxiety and depression.

Accepts most insurance

Tends to do brief therapy of 6-8 visits

Highly recommended by Veronica Decker RN, MSN at Beaumont Hospital

Works three days a week at Beaumont from 8AM to 8PM.

Phone 248-892-4364

Email [brucebhg@aol.com](mailto:brucebhg@aol.com)

SAMPLE

## Prostate Cancer Websites

Name of organization	General cancer info	Prostate cancer info	Symptom info
National Cancer Institute	<a href="http://www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/">http://www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/</a>	<a href="http://www.cancer.gov/prostate">http://www.cancer.gov/prostate</a>	
American Cancer Society	<a href="http://www.cancer.org/">http://www.cancer.org/</a>	<a href="http://www.cancer.org/eprise/main/docroot/SHR/content/SHR_2.1_x_Man_to_Man?sitearea=SHR">http://www.cancer.org/eprise/main/docroot/SHR/content/SHR_2.1_x_Man_to_Man?sitearea=SHR</a>	
Karmanos Cancer Institute	<a href="http://www.karmanos.org/">http://www.karmanos.org/</a>		
University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center	<a href="http://www.cancer.med.umich.edu/index.html">http://www.cancer.med.umich.edu/index.html</a>	<a href="http://www.cancer.med.umich.edu/prostcan/prostcan.html">http://www.cancer.med.umich.edu/prostcan/prostcan.html</a>	
University of Pennsylvania	<a href="http://www.oncolink.upenn.edu/">http://www.oncolink.upenn.edu/</a>		
National Prostate Cancer Coalition		<a href="http://www.4npcc.org/">http://www.4npcc.org/</a>	
American Urological Association (patient section)		<a href="http://www.auanet.org/patient_info/index.cfm">http://www.auanet.org/patient_info/index.cfm</a>	
US Too!		<a href="http://www.ustoo.com/">http://www.ustoo.com/</a>	
National Association for Continence			<a href="http://www.nafc.org/site/index.html">http://www.nafc.org/site/index.html</a>
Erectile Dysfunction site			<a href="http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/urolog/pubs/impotnce/impotence.htm">http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/urolog/pubs/impotnce/impotence.htm</a>
Oncology Nursing Society	<a href="http://www.hopelink.com/clinicaltrials/7/clinicaltrials.jsp">http://www.hopelink.com/clinicaltrials/7/clinicaltrials.jsp</a> (for information on clinical trials)		<a href="http://www.cancerfatigue.org/">http://www.cancerfatigue.org/</a>