

# Coping When a Loved One is Seriously Ill

---

Here are some ways to help family and caregivers cope when a loved one has a serious illness.

## Take Care of Yourself

- Coping with a serious illness can be very difficult. It is a time of uncertainty. You do not know what to expect and may feel stressed and tired. Family and caregivers need to be aware of their own health and wellness when a loved one is ill. Make sure you eat well, exercise, get your rest and take care of your own health care needs.
- Encourage other family and caregivers to take care of their own needs and accept offers of help. By taking care of yourself, you will be better able to take care of your loved one.

## Talk About It

- Talking can help. People respond differently to serious illness. Some patients and families may try to pretend or deny what is happening to them. Some families may not want a patient to be told about their disease or illness. For example, a family may try to “spare” their loved one from knowing a diagnosis or hearing about health care choices they may face in the future.
- Talk openly with each other. Not talking about an illness or hiding the truth from each other may push family members apart. If it is hard for a person to talk openly about illness, try to respect their wishes. Your nurse, social worker, and doctor can help you to talk with each other about difficult issues.

---

**This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

- Serious illness affects the family and caregivers as well as the patient. Family members may feel they could have done more for their loved one. Focus on what you can do for your loved one each day, instead of being concerned about the past.
- Serious illness can cause stress on a marriage or relationship. It may help to talk with a counselor about these issues. Counseling professionals are available to help you learn how to manage this stress. Tell your nurse if you would like to talk to a social worker, chaplain or clinical nurse specialist.
- Serious illness can cause family roles and duties to change. Breadwinners may need to become caregivers and caregivers may need to become breadwinners. Young children may become anxious, while teenagers may become angry about the changes caused by the illness.
- Sometimes family members may feel angry that they have to cope with a serious illness in the family. It may help to talk about these feelings with a close friend or counselor.

## **Get Help**

- Let yourself accept help from friends and family. When people ask what they can do, be ready with ideas. Have a list of tasks that need to be done, so the person can choose how they can help you. This will free you up to take care of yourself.
- Families may worry about money problems. There may be resources that can help or offer support. Talk to a social worker to learn about the resources that are available.
- If you are worried about caring for your loved one after their hospital stay, please ask to speak to a social worker. The social worker can give you information on resources such as home health care, hospice, or other community programs.
- JamesCare for Life offers a wide range of programs to support patients, families and caregivers. Ask a member of your health care team for more information.

## Ask Questions

- Ask your doctor or nurse if you are worried about your loved one. It may be helpful to write down your questions to have them ready when you talk with the health care team. They can answer your questions and tell you about your loved one's care.
- As a caregiver, it is sometimes hard to know how you should care for a person with serious illness. Ask what to expect and how you should help the person.
- If you are concerned that the illness can be spread to others, ask your doctor or nurse for more information.