

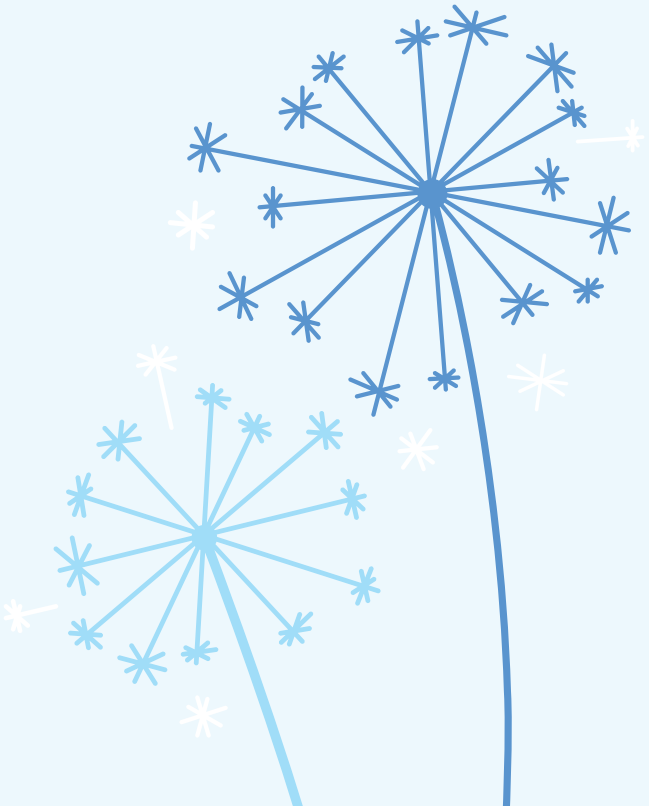
HIGHMARK

CARING PLACE 

finding hope in grief

Facing a
life-limiting illness

Connecting family, building memories



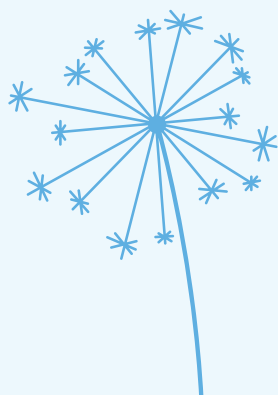
Getting news of a life-limiting illness is a shock. At first, it may feel impossible to comprehend what's happening. With support, families can navigate difficult conversations and big questions together to find moments of peace and connection.

Calling a family meeting

Telling children as a family sends a reassuring message that you're all going through this together.

Create a setting where:

- Everyone can be present and focused.
- A loved one will be there beside you.
- You have the help of a nurse or another supportive adult, if possible.



Sooner is better. Sharing difficult news with children sooner rather than later can benefit the entire family. Children often sense when something's wrong. Not knowing what's happening can make them feel more worried and alone.

Open communication allows for more time to process the information. It also creates opportunities to make lasting memories and reinforce family connections. Ultimately, though, it is most important to have the conversation when you feel you are ready.

Be direct. Help your child understand if you're at the beginning or further along the progression of the illness. Eventually, it will be important to say the word "dying," no matter how hard it might be. Children don't understand lightened language like "seriously ill" or "a grave condition."

Open for questions. At the end, allow everyone to do what they're most comfortable doing. Younger children may run off and play. A teen may want to spend time alone and process in a bedroom. Another may want to call a best friend. It's okay if there's not an immediate response. Everyone processes in their own way.



Helping them understand

Tell the story of an illness. Very young children respond best to describing illnesses with a visual aid like a doll or teddy bear. It may be helpful to have a beginning, middle, and end. You can describe symptoms as they started, doctors and tests at different points, and what will continue to happen. Keep the language as simple as possible.

Prepare for hospital visits. Describe the hallways, elevators, and room. Let them know how their family member is feeling and looking. You might say, “Mom is tired because of all the medicine she’s taking. She looks pale and will be lying in bed. She probably won’t talk a lot but will be happy to see you.”

Sometimes children are afraid they will be quick to catch the disease from their loved one. Is the disease contagious?

If not, explain that they can’t catch it like the cold or flu.

If yes, then list what you will do to keep everyone safe.

Confirm they understand. Double check with the children after discussing the illness to make sure they understood. One approach is asking,

“How would you explain what I just told you to a friend?”

OR

“Can you put into words what I just said?”

For very young children you might ask them to show you what’s wrong with their family member by using a doll or stuffed animal.

Make room for this to be an ongoing conversation. Children need repetition and time to process and understand.

Making memories

Time spent together will be the most treasured memories between a child and their sick loved one as they are able. Here are some ways to create keepsakes that reinforce relationships after death.

Write letters.

Handwritten letters and journals make a big impact. If the sick person is unsure what to say, use these thought-starters:

- What was it like the day the child was born?
- How is the child like you?
- What is your favorite food, color, activity, or piece of culture?
- Narrate a story from your childhood.
- Do you have a favorite quotation? Why is it important to you?



Create messages to open later.

If they're up for it, ask the sick family member to write notes for landmark days to come, such as a birthdays, graduations, and weddings. Grown children and adults love the fact that their family member was thinking of them.

Record their voice. Even short messages are cherished forever, especially when it includes the child's name.

Find favorite songs together. Help the child and sick person choose a few favorite songs they can call "our song." Have them play, sing, and dance to it together to cement the memory.

Put together stories from the child's point of view. Work with the child to create a special story of their life and times with their loved one. You can use photos, collages, and drawings.



Helping grieving children and families heal over a lifetime

Our mission is to create a world of compassionate communities where all people can find hope and healing after the death of a loved one. We provide grief support for families and individuals of all ages through peer groups, education, and advocacy.

Where to find us

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