

DR LOVE: Welcome to the Heart of Oncology. This is medical oncologist Dr Neil Love. One of the most challenging facets of life with cancer relates to the dialogue patients have with their minor children and particularly the question of exactly what should be said and how this varies with the age and emotional make up of the child. You are about to hear two perspectives on this dilemma from women who have been living with metastatic breast cancer for many years. The first is a 51-year-old mother who herself as a teenager dealt with cancer in a parent.

PATIENT NO. 1: I lost a father to lung cancer, and I grew up in an era where people didn't talk about illness like that. And I think that was hard on my family. So I was very determined that it was going to be an honest, open discussion, that we wouldn't give them more information than they can use at the age. It would be age appropriate, but that we would let them know what mom was going through. I won't say that it's always been easy. But the boys have always known what mom has been dealing with, that mom had cancer. Mom had to have the mastectomy. Mom had to have surgery. Mom's on treatments.

And I don't care what age your children are, it's scary to have Mom or Dad sick. But I've got my husband — he's here today, and he goes to almost every doctor and chemo appointment I've gone to. If you can imagine, right now I go every three weeks, and I've gone at least once a month for five years. And he's always there. So I get a lot of support from the entire family.

DR LOVE: Did your children run into any problems during this time; school problems or anything else that you think might have been related to what was going on?

PATIENT NO. 1: No, not really. I think they've done well. They seem to be pretty well adjusted.

They're all swimmers, so they've always been involved in that. And they've always had this great group of people, church-related friends that know what mom and the family's dealing with, and have had a lot of support. So we haven't seen any school problems or behavioral problems.

The youngest is the one I feel sorry for the most, because he's never known a mom that didn't have cancer, in his memory. He is the child at home for the last five years that's dealing with a mother that's been sicker than she's ever been sick.

DR LOVE: The second patient who reflected on life with metastatic cancer and smaller children is a 46-year-old woman who's been dealing with metastatic breast cancer for more than five years.

PATIENT NO. 1: I really felt the need to bring them into the process. My husband and I talked about it and we said, "You know what? These are really sharp kids. There's no need to lie. There's no need to put up any airs. Let's be honest with them."

So we gave them age-appropriate information on what was happening to me at the time, that I was sick with cancer, and explained, in basic terms, what cancer is, but that I would do everything humanly possible to stay alive, for me and for them, because they need their mother.

We sat them down and we said, "This is what may happen. You may see my hair fall out. You may see me very tired. You may see me lying on the sofa. It doesn't mean I'm dying. It doesn't mean I'm dead, but this is what's happening to me, and it's normal. This is nothing out of the ordinary.

My three-year-old daughter at the time, who just had incredible verbal skills and is extremely intuitive and bright, came up to me one day when I was in the hospital, and she hopped up on my lap and she said to me, "Mommy, even if you die, you will always be in my heart." And she just tapped my heart. And I said right then and there, "I will never give up fighting. Never."

My sons were angry. They were really, really upset. It was like they said, "Why is this happening to you?" They were six and eight at the time. "Why is this happening to you?"

I kept saying, "I don't know. Why does anything happen to anyone in life? We just have to work through it as a family. If you're angry, you need to deal with your anger. We can go to counseling."

They flat out refused to go to any kind of counseling. So my husband bought a punching bag and we put it downstairs in the basement, and they would punch the heck out of this bag. They actually took a pen and wrote on the punching bag, "This is the cancer," and they would punch it.

My husband is extremely supportive, just an unbelievable pillar of strength. He would always talk with the kids and say, "You know what? We're going to get through this together. Your mother is a very strong woman. We are a strong family. We will not give up on her."

DR LOVE: These patients and their families are not necessarily typical of women with metastatic breast cancer but in an arena where there are no right and wrong answers, sometimes it makes sense to speak with those who seem to have triumphed over what might otherwise appear to be an impossible situation. These victories are the heart of oncology. This is medical oncologist Dr Neil Love.