

# Using Group Interventions to Help Reduce Emotional Distress in Adolescents Impacted by a Parent's Cancer Diagnosis

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### Abstract

Children of a parent with cancer, even in its earliest stages, are more likely to experience emotional distress than children with healthy parents (Houck, 2007; Davey, Askew, & Godette, 2003). The research of Houck (2007) and Davey, Gulist, Askew, Godette, and Childs (2005) suggests that psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and behavioral issues are even more present among adolescents, as they are able to comprehend more about the diagnosis and its implications within the family. Simultaneously, they are struggling with wanting to be among peers, but feeling the strain of additional responsibilities and obligations at home. In the research of Davey et al.(2005), adolescents overwhelmingly reported that a group which allowed them to meet others like themselves, discuss their concerns, and learn more about cancer treatment and side effects would have been helpful in coping with their parent's cancer. This poster presents a structured creative arts based group to address the specific needs of adolescents affected by a parent's cancer diagnosis based on the interventions of Nelson (2010), Weiser (2001), and Johnson (1997). This multi-session group uses journaling, collage, painting, phototherapy and music. The specially designed activities are intended to (1) help identify and discuss thoughts, feelings, and concerns (2) learn new coping skills and enforce previous learned skills and (3) provide psycho-education regarding cancer and the changes within the family. Meeting others affected by cancer allows adolescents to feel less isolated while normalizing their experience. Each group session begins with a meal and gathering activity followed by the creative arts intervention. A psycho-education and support group for parents is also offered. The importance of including the parents is emphasized by the research of Edwards, Watson, St James-Roberts, and Ashley (2008) which found that good family functioning and cohesion were predictors of less psychological stress among adolescents. This presentation will provide an overview of the structure of the group as well as sample activities, interventions and case examples from the sessions.

### Components of Each Session

Each group session is broken down into a similar format in order to provide consistency and structure.

- Gathering meal
  - Goal: To make members feel more comfortable by providing food and discussing non cancer related topics.
- Ice-breaker and introduction
  - Goal: To familiarize new members with group structure, rules, etc. and normalize the parent with cancer experience, allowing teens to see that others are going through a similar situation.
- Primary intervention
  - Goal: To help alleviate anxiety about discussing feelings and concerns by providing a creative outlet for teens to express themselves and gently ease them into conversation.
- Voluntary sharing of art work
  - Goal: To allow teens the opportunity to share their work while facilitating discussion about common feelings, concerns, etc.
- "The Scoop" questions
  - Goal: To provide education and allow group members to ask questions they might not want to ask their family members. Asking questions while enjoying ice cream provides an informal and less threatening atmosphere. The facilitator will read questions that teens have asked in the past to facilitate discussion.

### Intervention 1

Using Collages to Help Teens Express How Cancer Has Impacted Their Family

- The collage is a very visual way to see how the cancer diagnosis has impacted the family. For those who are more reserved about discussing their work, the facilitator is able to get a glimpse of how they might be feeling by viewing their collage.
- Teens are asked to choose a phrase or sentence which will be the theme of their work.
- Examples are provided to the teens including :
  - "When I first heard the word cancer..."
  - "My friends just don't understand..."
  - "I wish people knew..."
  - "Now..."
- Group members create their collage using magazine photos and words, along with their own drawings.
- Sharing of the collages allows facilitation about common concerns, asking "has anyone else felt this way?" "What has helped you?" etc.
- The group members are encouraged to try this exercise at home with other prompts and are able to share their at home work in subsequent group sessions.



### Case Example 1

Justin

Justin is a 15 year old Hispanic male whose mom was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2007 and has been in treatment since.

Mom reports "Justin will talk about anything but cancer." She worries because he is often angry and she feels he doesn't understand what she is going through.

In the group, Justin found it quite easy to talk and said it helps to meet others who are going through something similar.

Through the use of collage, Justin was able to express what his life is like "Now."

Adding the words "he's a tough guy" to his collage, Justin explained that, as the only male in the family, he feels he cannot talk about his sadness with his mother and sister because he is supposed to be strong. Justin also explained that the main emotion he shows is anger, but he realizes that anger only masks other feelings including sadness and fear.

Justin fears that one day he may be diagnosed with cancer, as he was told that having family members with cancer puts him at a higher risk of developing cancer himself. During "The Scoop" the facilitator was able to lessen some of Justin's fears. Discussing early detection, healthy lifestyles, and the need for everyone to be followed by a doctor helped Justin to feel some control over his situation.

### Common Concerns

*The teenage years can be challenging as teens strive toward independence, attempt to fit in among their peers, and develop their identity. Teens that have a parent with cancer often struggle with additional concerns including:*

Coping with increased responsibilities at home

Feeling isolated

Worries about cancer occurring in the healthy parent

Peer support

Genetic risks

### Areas of Focus

*Therapeutic interventions are designed to address specific concerns and provide a forum for broader discussions and skill development including discussion of:*

Reactions to cancer in the family and how to cope with them

Ways to increase communication at home

How to manage school and other responsibilities

Identifying support systems

Identifying positive activities that reduce stress

### Intervention 2

Using Photographs and Photography to Document the Cancer Experience

The use of photographs as art can help teens to express emotion, document themes, and process the cancer diagnosis.

- Since time does not permit to take pictures at the group, photos taken by CancerCare Children's Program Staff will be displayed for each member to choose from.

- The teens will select a photo that represents a feeling, theme, or thought they have had since their parent was diagnosed.

Examples of photographs include:

- A cloudy or sunny day
- A half empty glass
- Fingers forming the shape of a heart
- A tree with no leaves
- A flower

- The photograph serves as the center of the piece and the teens create their work of art around it adding words, drawings etc.

- As the photography itself can be therapeutic, disposable cameras and photo books were provided to each teen to encourage photography at home. The teens can use photography to document their feelings throughout the cancer diagnosis whether they are having a good day or a difficult day.

### Case Example 2

Amanda

Amanda is a 13 year old Caucasian female whose mother was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago and recently completed treatment.

Her mother reports that Amanda and her sister are "coping well, but could benefit from meeting other teens that have a parent with cancer."

Amanda chose two photographs (hands in the shape of a heart and a broken pencil) to represent how she felt when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Amanda explained that she felt "loved but broken."

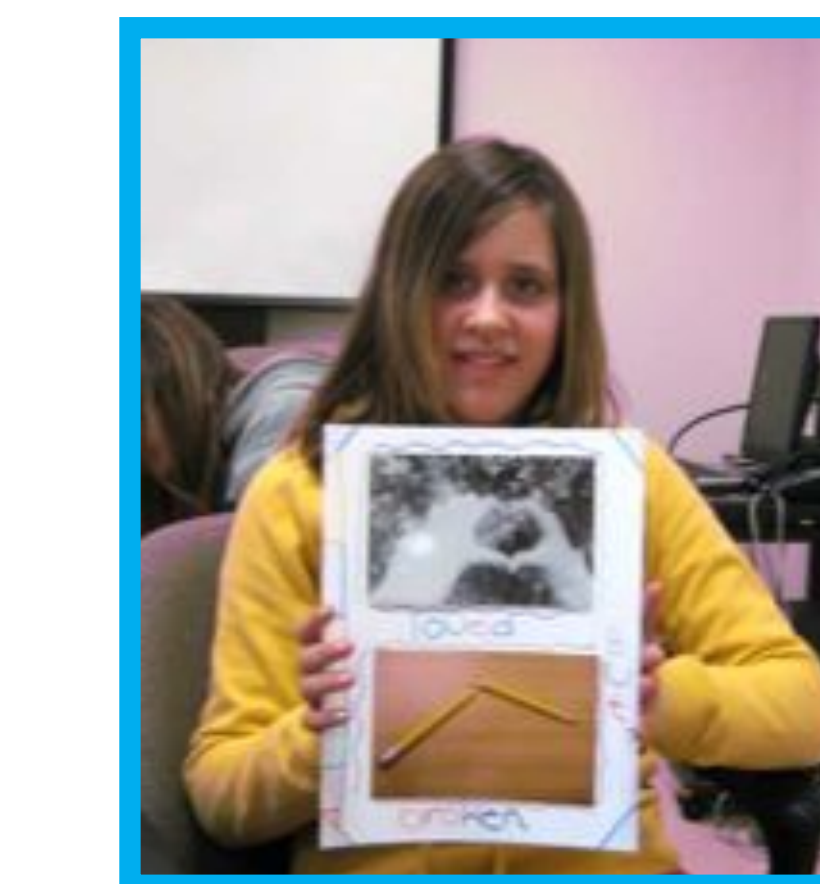
Being able to hear from other teens that they had similar feelings helped normalized Amanda's experience. She quickly made friends with the other group members, exchanging telephone numbers and making plans to meet for pizza.

### Other Interventions

These additional interventions have been used in other sessions to reduce emotional distress and promote good coping skills.

**Music as a Way to Cope**

- Discussion regarding the impact that songs can have. (Some songs help you to experience deep emotions, while others pick you up when we are feeling down).
- Facilitator shares examples of music that the teens might be able to relate to. The music is played and lyrics are handed out.
- Group members are asked if there are any particular songs or lyrics that they are able to relate to recently. Using cardstock, teens write down some lyrics from these songs or create their own lyrics if wanting to.



Other Interventions, continued

**Teen Advice**

- At the last session teens are asked to reflect on their experience and what has been helpful to them.
- Group members are told that teens in future sessions would benefit from their advice.
- The teens create a banner in which they share comforting thoughts, ideas, and advice. This gives the teens an opportunity to feel good about being able to help other teens while also reflecting upon what helps them.

### Ways to Develop Coping Skills Outside of the Group

Each teen and parent are provided with items to help reinforce good coping skills when away from the group.

**Every teen receives:**

- An educational booklet from the National Cancer Institute, When Your Parent Has Cancer: A Guide for Teens, which addresses common concerns of teens and provides age appropriate medical information.
- A folder to keep art work that they have created in the group. Included in the folder is additional cardstock and ideas for work they can create at home.
- A pocket calendar to write important phone numbers, doctors appointments and changes to their normal schedule.
- A photo cube in which teens can place pictures. Putting in pictures of friends and family reminds teens of their support system. Pictures of family members can also be used as a transitional object when the parent with cancer may need to be away from home.
- Post it notes that teens can use as reminders for themselves or their parent, as the additional stress of cancer in the family may make it more difficult to remember certain details.

**Every parent receives:**

- CancerCare's Connect Education booklet, Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer.
- CancerCare's Fact Sheet, Helping Teenagers When a Parent Has Cancer.
- Information on the activities of each group session, including ways to reinforce what is learned in the group at home.

### Conclusion and Considerations

The teens found the group to be a place where they are understood by others and are able to discuss questions and concerns that they are not talking to their parents about. Some considerations when forming a teen group would be (1) There may be certain settings and times that work best for teens. Consider hospital vs. community setting and after school vs. night or weekend (2) Involving parents in the group process helps them to get a better understanding of the group and leads to higher participation levels (3) There may not be enough staff available for a teen group and parent group. Collaborating with another agency or treatment center to provide the program may help with this concern. Parent group may also be held less often.

### CancerCare's Mission

CancerCare is a national nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization that provides free, professional support services to anyone affected by cancer: people with cancer, caregivers, children, loved ones, and the bereaved. CancerCare programs—including counseling and support groups, education, financial assistance and practical help—are provided by professional oncology social workers and are completely free of charge.



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