

## A Mother, a Daughter and a Deadly Cancer

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**Kristiane Stapleton, PhD**  
Daughter, Caregiver

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### **Kristiane Stapleton:**

When we first found out that my mother had cancer, I was 16. And I can remember she got a phone call with the bad news, and she came and she found me at the front of the house. And she started crying, and she said that she had cancer. And I can remember giving her a big hug as she was crying and thinking in my head this changes everything. I'm not a kid anymore.

And that moment when you suddenly realize that you have to look after a parent and that you can look after a parent was a really kind of shocking revelation for me with cancer, and that was kind of the moment when I realized that this was going to change all of our lives.

During the 15 years that my mother has either been an active cancer patient or has been in remission in between it's been really difficult to keep going some of those times. But it was just so important for me that she felt supported as she was going through all of this, that—I felt like we really drew on the family, that we all really kind of came together to support her.

And I was very lucky to have friends that I could lean on as well, so I felt like I was able to lend strength to her because I was supported by the other members of my family and by friends. And so I feel like for me coping in many ways was something that happened afterwards, once we were done with the treatment, that I didn't have time to cope as we were going through, that it was too much to process, that you just kind of woke up every day, and you dealt with what was happening that day. And you didn't think about it if you could help it.

So it was just kind of getting up, getting through it, being there to provide support. And sometimes I'd look back at a day and I'd think, man, how did we get through that? You know, we did that. We sat in a hospital on Christmas Eve, and we smiled, and we joked and we threw Christmas in an ICU room. And how did we get through that?

And you cope because you have to, because there's no other thing that you can do and still support, in my case my mother, who's going through all of this and who needs that support.

One of the major things that helped me to cope as we were going through all of this was the sense that we just had to keep moving forward and that if we just kept moving forward and we just got through each day one by one, that there were be another one on the other side and that I would deal with kind of everything that was happening afterwards if I needed to.

And when things were really dire, when things were really awful, it felt like you have to enjoy, and you have to be there for those moments and just kind of get through every day, because you might not have a number of days. So we really valued those moments and really pushed through those days, and I always thought that I would cope at the end.

And thankfully, the end didn't come, and then I had to cope with that. But we just kind of kept one foot in front of the other, and we just kind of got through it.

So the best piece of advice that I could give to someone who's supporting someone who is going through cancer is

to be there for them in every way that you can. One of the hardest parts for me was being far away from my mother during one of her diagnoses, and I would call her on the phone all the time. Whenever I was driving somewhere, I'd call just to let her know that I was thinking about her and that I was there. And when she had a really bad day, I would send her gifts, silly gifts and things like that just to let her know that I was there and that I was thinking about her.

And her diagnosis was really difficult. She had a very slim chance of survival, and so I started sending her flying pigs because I wanted to give her something that was silly and something that was light-hearted but also something that said you will get through this. You will be the exception.

And so whenever I would talk to her and she was having a down day I would send her, you know, a card with a flying pig or a tiny, little crocheted flying pig or a piggy bank that was a flying pig, something just to kind of let her know that I was thinking about her. It was never expensive, but it was just something small.

And so letting them know that they are very much a part of your life and that you love them and that you—you see them as something—as someone who isn't just a cancer patient. You know, watching TV with them or having activities with them or jokes with them are really important things to keep doing to kind of show that support.

And even if you are far away, there are ways that you can still support them. And it's difficult. It's really exhausting, but there are things you can do.

The other piece of advice that I would have for people whose parents are going through this is it's really important to look after yourself as well, that that was something that I never took the time for when my mother was sick, that it was all about making sure she was okay, and I didn't spend enough time on myself.

And when she actually got better, which was not something that I expected, it was really hard to suddenly deal with the fact that I hadn't sort of taken any time to think about how I was feeling or what I was going through, and I hadn't coped with me, because I had been so busy coping with her.

So I would say for people who are really struggling with a parent who is very ill to make time for yourself, to go to therapy, to talk to your friends, to realize that it's awful for them. But it's awful for you too, and it's okay to feel that way, and that taking care of yourself now will really help and that you deserve it as well.

I certainly believe in miracles. My mother is one.

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