**The Role of Caregivers in Pediatric Cancer: Supporting Emotional and Physical Wellbeing**

**When Your Whole World Changes**

The doctor doesn’t need to say the word.

Emily sees it in his eyes before she hears it in his voice.

She is holding her little guy’s hand— tiny and sticky with grape juice and innocence— when the words "admission today" and "need to run tests" fill the air like shattering glass.

Suddenly, everything is muffled, as if underwater. She goes onto autopilot. While the doctor attempts to explain blood tests and biopsies, Emily’s ears begin to fill with an audible hum of panic. Her mind goes in a million different directions. How can this be happening?

Her heart sinks as she succumbs to the feeling that her worst fears are realized. Try as she might to wish it away, she admits she has noticed some things over the past month.

* He seemed more **tired than usual**, dozing off in the car or asking to skip soccer practice, which he NEVER does.
* He’d had a couple of **nosebleeds,** too**,** nothing dramatic, but more than one, which was too many.
* Then there was the **low-grade fever** that kept coming back over the past week, never high enough to seem urgent, but never fully going away either.
* Now her son had **bruises that didn’t make sense**, deep purple ones that had shown up without a bump or a fall over the last few days.

How was this spiraling out of control so quickly? Why had she not already done something? How long had it been, really? She was trying to think. She had tried to convince herself it was probably nothing. Kids get run down, especially after a long week. She had called his pediatrician and made an appointment next week, the first available. But when he tripped at school today and scraped his elbow, and the bleeding wouldn’t stop, the nurse called and suggested Emily take him to the ER *just to be safe*.

She hadn’t dared imagine that this precautionary visit— the one she had hoped would end with a bandage and a popsicle— would be the beginning of an entirely new reality. But then, there had been that nagging feeling deep in her heart that something could be terribly wrong.

**Facing the Unimaginable**

Her son looks up at her, confused but calm. He’s still waiting to hear if they can stop for ice cream on their way home. She nods to the doctor as he continues speaking, asks questions, and signs forms with a shaking hand.

What she desperately wants to do is pick her baby up and run—run as fast as they can, run without looking back, run to an hour ago, run for their lives! But instead, they stay and get admitted for testing. They will be here for a long time today, into the night, and the coming days. This will be the first trip of many, a new normal for Corey and his parents. He is going to need so much from her, more than she has to give, but she will provide it, and she will need help.

She asks more questions, makes notes, and calls his dad. She stands a little closer, a little taller, instinctively protective of her most precious creature, her little guy, her world. A little later, Emily wipes the tears on her sleeve in the bathroom and walks back out smiling because her son needs her to be brave enough for both of them right now, and she will be—today, tomorrow, and always.

Right there in that hospital room, Emily becomes something more than his mom.
In that moment, she becomes his caregiver, his medical advocate, his quiet source of strength, and a million other things; multifaceted, like a diamond.

And like so many other parents on this journey, she steps into this role without training, without a road map, and without knowing what tomorrow holds for her and her family. She certainly doesn’t *feel* like a diamond.

**A Parent's Role: So Much More Than Just Caregiving**

When a child is diagnosed with cancer, everything shifts. Time slows down and speeds up all at once. The rest of the world keeps spinning, but yours stands still. In that moment, a parent doesn’t just become a caregiver—they become the emotional anchor, the medical coordinator, the voice in every doctor’s office, the brave face when everything feels impossible.

If you’re reading this, I want you to know I see you. No one can possibly know the extent of what you are carrying, but having walked alongside families navigating medical crises, I have seen that much of it is invisible to the outside world. I have seen parents and families suffer in silence instead of allowing loved ones in.

Caregiving is love in action. And it’s hard. Really hard. But even when it feels like it, you are not alone. So, you may need to know where to look for – and more importantly – how to accept help and support.

**What Caregivers Really Do (That No One Sees)**

Caregivers are the quiet glue holding everything together. You’re not just attending appointments, you’re managing medications, fielding questions from family, comforting your child in the middle of the night, keeping siblings grounded, coordinating schoolwork, and trying to hold onto pieces of normalcy when everything feels far from it.

You become the one who remembers which antiemetic worked best last time. You know how to decode your child’s expression better than any chart ever could. You’re juggling conversations with oncologists, social workers, and insurance companies like you took medical terminology in college—all while trying to keep dinner on the table and the laundry from taking over.

And through it all, you’re trying to stay strong for your child(ren).

But here’s the truth: strength doesn’t mean never breaking. Strength means showing up anyway—even when you're tired, afraid, and unsure.

**The Emotional Toll: It’s OK Not to Be OK**

No one prepares you for how lonely caregiving can feel. Even with friends and family around, it’s easy to feel like no one really *gets it*. You might find yourself holding it all in because you don’t want to seem ungrateful or weak.

You may feel fear that grips you in the pit of your stomach, guilt for feeling exhausted, or anger at the unfairness of it all. These feelings don’t make you a bad parent or a bad person. They make you human.

Sometimes, the most challenging part is just knowing you can’t fall apart because you’re the one holding everyone else together.

You don’t have to carry this alone.

**Caring for the Caregiver: Help can look a lot of different ways**

**You matter**. Your health, emotional and physical, is a huge part of your child’s support system. You **must** take care of yourself, just like you are taking care of your husband, the kids, and everyone else.

But let’s be real. “Self-care” can feel like a joke when you haven’t slept in days and you’re running on coffee and hope. So, let’s talk about **realistic** self-care.

* **Say yes to help.** If someone offers to bring dinner, do a school pickup, or run errands—**LET THEM!** People *want* to show up, they want to help, but they don’t always know how. It is a blessing to them to get to do something to help you in some small way.
* **Create a tiny moment for yourself each day.** Whether it's five deep breaths in the bathroom or listening to your favorite song in the car—it counts. Even if it’s something that seems simple or silly, if it brings you a smile for a moment, it’s worth it.
* **Talk to someone.** Whether it’s a counselor, support group, or another parent who’s been there, letting your emotions out can lighten the load.
* **Lower the bar.** Some days, just surviving is the win. Give yourself as much grace as you would give a beloved friend going through this.

**You Are Not Alone—Sassy Carmen Is Here**

Some resources attempt to help you understand what you’re going through and offer you that grace, and you’ve found one here. The Sassy Carmen Foundation stands beside families like yours, offering not just practical support but emotional connections and a sense of community. Whether it's through peer support, online forums, or counseling, Sassy Carmen helps caregivers connect with others who truly understand.

Caregiving can feel isolating, but you don’t have to carry the emotional weight alone. Allowing yourself to lean on others, even just knowing there’s someone to talk to, can make all the difference.

You are doing more than enough. Your love and presence are sacred. Keep going—but remember, you don’t have to do it alone.

**❤️ Final Thought**

If no one has told you this lately: ***You’re doing an incredible job*.** And while this road is unimaginably complex, your love, your presence, and your care are life-giving.

You are seen. You are supported. And you are not alone.