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Grown Too Soon: A Tale of Parental Illness

Imagine having a daily routine and a specific role to play in your household. For most people, structure and stability built off the strength and capabilities of their parents is something they have never lived without. However, there are millions of children in the United States alone who have become caretakers in their families because a parent is diagnosed with a long-term illness. While this can be a mental or physical illness, the stress placed on the children remains the same. Not only is this a large-scale issue, but it is one that is often ignored in our national society, as family struggles are seen as private manners. The United States should provide support for these children who watch their right to a childhood be stripped from them as they care for a sick parent.

Diagnosis of a long-term illness in any person can be difficult for the individual and those who love them, let alone someone who is a parent. Many of the affected children report new stressors which cause their childhoods to shift. In the book *My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks: Real-life Advice from Real-life Teens* by Maya and Marc Silver, there is a recurring theme throughout each family's cancer battle: "After the cancer news: Everything seems different." While this may seem like an obvious observation, this is the shared moment in which children realize that the life they've had up to that point will not continue in the same manner. For some children, this change means becoming aware of their parent's mortality, which can be the beginning of a forced maturity. In fact, parental research suggests that "A child's main concern is how his or her life will be affected" (*When A Parent Has A Mental Illness*). After noting the

emotional and physical change in their household environment, children often become afraid of how their routines and roles may shift as well.

Being a child with a parent who has a long-term illness can consume several aspects of their lives and force them to put aside their childhood to help manage their household. It is noted that often “Children have to care for parents due to role reversal” (*When A Parent Has A Mental Illness*). This means while they are going to school, they must also help around the house, a responsibility that can include chores, bills, and even nursing a parent back to health. Because these roles are constantly present and demanding, it is often the older kids in the household who must step up. While this makes more sense than the younger children giving up their childhoods to pitch in, many families overcompensate to protect their small ones by giving all of the responsibilities to the teens. This means while the older kids are balancing homework, school, and running a household, “younger kids may have an easier time as parents are focussed on preserving their childhoods.” (Silver). The younger children in the household live shielded from the reality of their parent’s illness while the older child usually knows too much, and protecting their siblings from this knowledge can become another laborious task.

But the problems for these children rarely end with the extra stress from a shift in household roles. Becoming aware of the situation around them often causes the realization that genetic factors may create the same illness in their bodies later in life. In the case of mental illnesses: “If one parent has schizophrenia, the child has an 18% chance of developing the disorder. [...] Children of mothers experiencing Clinical Depression have a 20% risk of depression” (*When A Parent Has A Mental Illness*). This means that children spend their

childhoods seeing the horrible torture the illness brings their parent, only to fear the possibility of their future diagnosis. The struggle for teens can be an especially severe one, as “teens with parents who have cancer or a mental illness are at more risk for anxiety and depression.” (Silver). This means that in addition to genetic factors, the upsetting manner of having a chronically ill parent can manifest itself as depression and anxiety especially in teens who are well informed and updated on the status of their parent’s health. These teens are still children, yet they must face these inevitable truths alone while putting others’ health in front of their own.

There is no accurate statistic for the amount of parents in the United States suffering from these diseases, as mental health can be defined in different ways. Illnesses like cancer however, can be measured and are less common than a mental illness. According to Camp Kesem, an organization that specializes in helping kids cope with their family’s cancer, there are over “5 million children” whose parents have been diagnosed. This 5 million seems like a huge population, yet is only a minority when compared to the larger group of all parents with long term illnesses. In addition to the large need, there are hardly any organizations besides paid therapists and school counselors that extend help. While professional help is essential in protecting the mental health of the young caretakers, financial support or even just a temporary release from responsibilities can be highly beneficial in the process of preserving one’s childhood and stability. For children whose parent(s) have cancer, there is Camp Kesem. “Kesem is the only national organization dedicated to this unique population. [...] Serves roughly 6000 kids a year” (Kesem). While this expanding free camp gives children a safe environment to live out their childhood, the program is only a week long and is fighting the battle alone, currently

serving 12% of the children specifically dealing with parents who have cancer. That means there is a much larger problem going on without any major support.

While this issue is large and dire, many psychologists think the answer is simply designating time for kids to explore being a child. “Getting out of the house during the months of treatment is a good way to break out of the tough routine.” (Silver). Spending time involved in community outside the house can keep families from being stuck in a stressful pattern (Hargreaves). This designated exploration of one’s external environment can be a healthy switch from overbearing roles and responsibilities, however, most of these children’s issues stem from the inability to escape the situation due to a lack of free time. Psychologists also suggest that children’s resentment toward their parents is because they “receive less nurturing when a parent is ill” (Silver). While children’s anxiety and depression from the situation is often credited to poor nurturing while a parent is ill, a child does not have parental nurture as a priority when their energy and concern is focused on the recovery and wellbeing of their parent.

During the process of a long term parental illness, children are put through new situations, forced to face their parent’s mortality, and even pressured to grow up. While older teens rising to the occasion is admirable, most children are not equipped to handle their new roles psychologically. With the start of programs in the United States designated to supporting these children, the nation would be investing not only in each household’s wellbeing, but that of the future generation.

Works Cited

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