

Help Kids Cope

Things I did that helped me cope with cancer in my family.

By Tessa Hamermesh

Cancer is a scary disease. It can make people have many different emotions. I have experienced cancer a lot—three of my grandparents have had cancer. About three years ago I lost my grandpa to cancer. He had cancer once before but this time he was on oxygen and was using a walker, and he was in the hospital all the time. I was only eight years old when he died. I was so upset and angry that I started to take it out on my friends. That was definitely the wrong thing to do. I finally started counseling to help me. It was still hard to talk about.



I have learned from that experience, and now, at 11 years old, I am very educated about cancer. My Nana Beverlye is a cancer survivor and she has also taught me a lot. I thought it would be a good idea to write a book with her that would help other kids understand cancer and feel more comfortable talking about it. That is why we co-wrote *Nana, What's Cancer?* for the American Cancer Society.

I remember that when I was going through my grandparents' illnesses, all of my family helped me in different ways. I would like to share some of the things I did that helped me get through cancer in my family, so you will know what might help your children get through it too.

- I talked to my family. It is important to remember that family and friends are always there to help you and they'll love you no matter what. The first couple of weeks I couldn't talk to my family because the subject was way too hard and scary. But when I finally did, it made me feel so much better.
- I made cards for my loved ones who had cancer. I spent more time with them. We watched movies and sang songs. Most importantly, I told them I loved them; it helped them feel so much better!
- I went for counseling. This helped me become more confident. I know that the sound of therapy will turn some kids off. Sometimes you can't rush a child because it will make him or her even less willing to try. You might have to let them have their space for a while, but don't give up.
- I became more active. I played more sports and did more things outside the house than inside. This helps because moving your body helps get your anger out. Also, a breath of fresh air is always nice.

- I hung out with friends and bonded with them more. This helps because you can always talk to a friend. I have friends now that I can tell everything to without being afraid of getting judged.
- I found hobbies and really got into learning about them. (For me, my hobbies are sports and singing.) This really helped me know that there are things in the world that I am good at and that are really fun.
- I did charity work. I held bake sales to raise money for cancer. This made me feel like I was doing my part. My Nana, my Mom and I took some children with cancer to Universal Studios to show them a good time outside of the hospitals. Seeing all their smiles helped brighten my spirits.
- I expressed my creativity through writing. For someone else, it might mean painting, drawing, sculpting, making pottery, dancing or anything that allows them to express their emotions. This helped me work my feelings out, which felt good.
- I read more than ever. Reading for me is like watching a movie, only better. When I read, I become a princess in a faraway land or a girl sitting on a bench in Central Park in New York City. Reading helped me escape. It also made me feel that I was never alone. I always had that trusty companion on my bedside table just waiting for me to open it.
- I began doing yoga to center myself. I didn't go to classes, but I worked on deep breathing and different calming techniques. I did a couple Sun Salutations every week.
- I tried to remember to laugh. Laughter is the best medicine. If only for that moment, laughing makes everything better. Telling jokes and doing funny things—even watching a funny movie—helped brighten my day.
- I used my imagination more. I do this because things aren't always perfect or go the way I want them to go. I know I'll always have my mind to come up with a new idea for a poem or a painting. Like with books, imagining lets me be in my own little perfect world, if only for a little while.

Eleven-year-old Tessa Mae Hamermesh co-authored the book Nana, What's Cancer? with her Nana, Beverlye Hyman Fead, to help kids understand what cancer is and to inspire families to talk openly about it. Beverlye is a stage IV cancer survivor who lives a happy and active life with cancer. Tessa is the eldest of Beverlye's five grandchildren and her only granddaughter. Nana, What's Cancer? (American Cancer Society, 2009) is available on Amazon.com, www.cancer.org/bookstore and wherever books are sold.