

Adolescents, Palliative Care & Transition

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Goals of Adolescents

- Normal developmental tasks include:
 - clarification of self-image
 - gaining independence
 - establishing peer relationships
 - establishing sexual identity
 - creating plans for the future

When a diagnosis of a life-limiting or life-threatening illness comes...

- Impact on these normal, age-appropriate developmental milestones
- Loss of control
- Interferes with ability to communicate honestly and openly with peers & parents
- Leads to a sense of flawed identity
- Undermines independence
- Limits socialising
- Prohibits future planning

- Adolescence = time of self-esteem linked to peers
 - Acceptance of self linked to acceptance by peers
 - Gradual separation from parents
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- Hospitalisation, drug side-effects, hair loss negatively affect self-esteem → lack of acceptance
 - Reliance on parents → lack of independence

How do adolescents perceive illness?

- Able to explain illness in sequence of events
- Can understand cause as malfunction or non-function
- Realise that psychological actions & attitudes affect health & illness

How can we help?

- Must allow them to be integral part of decision making
- Give information. Needs to be sensitive – react to content and delivery
- Allow as much choice and control as possible
- Honesty re treatments, side effects etc
- Promote independence, cooperation & compliance
- Promote peer interactions

Some examples of adolescent input

- ZA – thyroid tumour
- AM – osteosarcoma
- FS – leukaemia

Grief & Loss

- Abstract thinking develops
- May show philosophic pondering about the meaning of life and death
- Grief may appear as withdrawn depressive symptoms
- May think in terms of an afterlife as well
- Often have powerful emotions and may be surprised by them
- Grieve each loss as it happens

Challenges in transition

- Parental access
- Management of illness changes
- Less empathy
- Fear
- Isolation

Tools to help with transition

- Communication teen, parent & treating team
- Emphasis on choice and control
- Journaling
- Art / Poetry
- River of Life

Things to Remember:

- Start process early not when child turns 12
- Include child in as many of the decisions as possible
- Choices and control
- Where possible be part of first meeting with new team
- Keep communication open
- Listen to hear not to answer
- Feelings are real, acknowledge and validate

Any questions?

