



Lessons Learned After Losing a Child to Cancer

The greatest fear of every parent is losing a child. The experience of one Charlotte mom urges hope.

July 9, 2018 / [Meg McElwain, Momcologist](https://www.charlotteparent.com/author/meg-mcelwain/) (<https://www.charlotteparent.com/author/meg-mcelwain/>)



Photo courtesy of Meg McElwain

Meg McElwain lost her son Mitchell to leukemia when he was only 2 years old. Since his death in 2014, Meg and her son Frank Turner IV, have been open about their grief journey.

Meg is a philanthropist at [Mitchell's Fund](http://mitchellsfund.org/) (<http://mitchellsfund.org/>), the non-profit she founded to help families struggling to cover the living expenses during the crisis of a life threatening pediatric illness. The heart of Mitchell's Fund is pediatric cancer, but the fund also supports pediatric behavioral health. She believes her purpose is to help others recover after loss. This is what she learned and would like to share from the experience of losing a child.

Things Happen Fast

When Mitchell first got sick, things happened really quickly. He was only 3 months old when we noticed bruising on his legs. That was a Sunday on the afternoon of his baptism. We went to the doctor the next morning who immediately recognized something was very wrong with Mitchell. He ordered a blood panel, and by noon Monday, we knew Mitchell had white blood cell cancer. By 5:30 p.m. that evening,

Mitchell was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia with a 40 percent chance of survival and chemotherapy to start the next day. There was no time to sit and think.

I am so thankful we were taken seriously and not told to “watch and wait.” Getting a blood panel immediately gave us the diagnosis we needed to start aggressively treating the cancer. That is likely why we had as much time with Mitchell as we did.

Listen to Your Nurses, not Dr. Google

Our doctors gave us material to read and told us NOT to Google anything about leukemia. We listened and I am glad we did. Dr. Google will tell you your foot’s going to fall off when you have a hang nail. We trusted our medical team and were open to the social services the children’s hospital offered. That gave us an incredible amount of hope.

Acquaintances Forget. Friends Don’t.

In the beginning, everyone was there to help whether it was cooking meals or helping with Frank, who was 3 at the time. But that stopped, especially after Mitchell died. People went back to their lives and were less attentive about our circumstances, which is human nature, but can also be hurtful.

In a way, I think people feel like they are supposed to get back to normal, but there is no normal after you lose a child. Everything changes. It has become impossible for me to hear a baby cry without thinking about the child I once rocked to sleep. It’s hard seeing other children achieve milestones that my child never will. Mitchell would be starting first grade this year.

Through this experience, I learned a lot about the people in my life. Some people are drawn to tragedy in a strange way or are grief vultures. The people whose friendship I value the most made it a point to circle the anniversary of Mitchell’s death on their calendar and reach out to say, “I know it’s coming up and I am sorry. I am praying for you and I love you.”

People say Stupid Things

After I lost Mitchell, people said the most ridiculous things, like, “you need to have another baby,” or “you need to adopt a child.” It was also unhelpful to hear, “he’s in a better place,” and “you’re so strong.” Once someone said, “if you stop talking about it, maybe it will get better.” I get it ... it’s hard to know what to say, but I always value when someone just lets me talk about him and how much I miss him. Sometimes just saying, “I love you,” is enough.

It’s OK to say What you Need and What you Don’t

The experience of losing my son has made me less inclined to engage in drama and to be more direct. For example, some people are big huggers – I am not one of them. Eventually, I told people hugs were not what I needed. After Mitchell died, there were certain conversations I just had to remove myself from though people may have not understood why. I turned down offers of help that weren’t helpful as well-intended as they were. I think some people wanted to “fix” or “help” me. If you are grieving the loss of a child, it’s not about other people, it’s about you. I think this is why many marriages end in divorce after the death of a child. Each person grieves differently and the pain often causes such differences that relationships suffer. My marriage to Mitchell’s dad ended in divorce three years after Mitchie died.

There’s Always More Beyond the Surface

Whether it’s a marriage in trouble, impending financial ruin, addiction or mental health illness, there’s always more going than just the long-term critical illness. Mitchell’s illness went on for two years, and there were so many other things we were dealing with that others never knew about. Much of the stress families feel during this time is financial because one parent has to basically live at the hospital while the other works or cares for other children.

Childhood cancer treatment protocols are so much more intense and fast paced than adult cancer. There is more time in the hospital and at the clinic. This is one of the big reasons why I started Mitchell’s Fund, to try to alleviate the burden of everything else that happens at the cost of prioritizing your critically ill child.

Life Goes on

You are never not going to feel the pain, but it gets easier to carry. The first two years were the absolute worst. ... I felt so emotionally heavy and physically burdened. But after I had been through the second Christmas, the second Easter, the second Mother's Day, I knew I could get through it because I had done it once before. It was then that I felt I could really move forward. I miss him every single day.

You will Survive

I now know my purpose on this earth: to channel my hurt to help others heal. Whether fund raising for Mitchell's Fund, speaking to groups about resilience or just being more present with my living son, I am more intentional with everything in my life and have learned that living slower is better. At the end of it all, I will hold my baby again and hear him say "Mama." I can't wait.

Meg McElwain is a professional speaker and blogger on resilience. Learn more about her at megmcelwain.com

(<http://megmcelwain.com/>). For more information on keeping your child safe and well, visit [pedsurgical.com](http://www.pedsurgical.com)

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