



The Beat Podcast  
Season 2, Episode 4: Transcript

# Kids under pressure: When a parent falls ill

## The Beat: Season 2, Episode 4

[00:00:01] **Stephan Maighan** And the first thing that we realized when she came back to her senses is she no longer had any idea of who I was. Her only son. She couldn't recognize me.

[00:00:14] **Caroline Lavallée** I'm Caroline Lavallée, and you're listening to The Beat, a podcast by Heart & Stroke, with support from our generous donors. Thanks for listening.

Now let's get into the episode. When a parent has a stroke, heart attack or cardiac event, the emotional and physical impacts hit the whole family. It can be even more devastating for children, especially young ones. They may not fully understand what's happened or know how to cope with a blizzard of feelings, and in some cases they have to grow up fast helping to care for their parent. We're going to hear a firsthand account of what it's like to be the child of a parent who had a life-changing health crisis. And we'll get eye opening advice from a social worker who supports children through such challenging times.

Stephan Maighan was leading the life of an average seven year old, growing up in Montreal with his single mother. Then tragedy struck. While they were sitting in a car together, his 28 year old mom had a stroke, and their lives were suddenly changed forever. She spent an entire year in hospital recovering. When she returned home, Stephan wasn't an average kid anymore.

[00:01:51] **Stephan Maighan** I became the man of the house, if you will, when I was seven years old, because she didn't have a boyfriend or husband. I didn't have brothers or sisters. So the cooking, I started learning quite young. A few times per week we'd have caregivers that would come to the house and help with her bath and in sometimes with the bathroom. But I was the main caregiver when I was at home.

[00:02:14] **Caroline Lavallée** Children like Stephan can be hit by emotions, from fear to anger and more. And sometimes those feelings can come out in challenging behavior.

[00:02:28] **Stephan Maighan** All of this happening at a very young age, was very, very sad. It was very difficult and I had to try to learn to process it, but I wasn't equipped. I didn't have the tools. I wasn't necessarily seeing therapists or psychologists that could help me process. I wish I did, because it was extremely difficult. It was difficult for my mom as well. All in all, I got expelled from four different schools. I was sent to juvenile detention centre when I was 14 years old. Different homes, different families, different schools. For years I was a delinquent and I wasn't doing well at all.

[00:03:14] **Caroline Lavallée** Here's Émilie Pothier-Tessier, a social worker who works with children experiencing the serious illness, or death, of a parent or loved one.

[00:03:26] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** It happens sometimes that we are seeing a child who is acting out. But it's important to not see only the habit. I like to ask the kids, the children, "Just tell me, how can I help you?". Instead of just looking at the actions, like acting out. And when we talk about their needs, about what is difficult for them or what changes they want to see in their lives, we are more able to help them.

[00:03:58] **Caroline Lavallée** It is important for children to talk about what has happened to their parent. We may shy away from those conversations, hoping that what they don't know won't hurt them. But that's not the case.

[00:04:14] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** There are so many taboos in society regarding the needs of children who live with a parent who has a medical condition, like a heart attack or stroke. We still hear a lot that children don't understand, that they don't have any needs, and so we focus on the adults. It is important not to leave children in the dark. We can inform them about the impacts of heart attack or stroke. We can explain the impact on their loved one and help them understand. The more we leave children in the dark, the more we create that taboo. This taboo is harmful for the child, and it creates stress for them because when they don't understand, they can imagine a lot of things.

Some children don't want to know everything. When a child wants to know, it's important to give him information, because when we don't know, we are imagining a lot of things. A lot of anxiety can be created by that.

[00:05:21] **Caroline Lavallée** Like adults, it's easy for children to imagine the worst-case scenario, which will only cause more fear and anxiety. So it's important to be open and honest. But how does the child's age come into play?

[00:05:36] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** Depending on the age, you may need to use visual aids to help them understand. For example, showing a picture of the human body to explain how the heart works, helps a young child to understand. The age of the child influences the level of explanation. We must use different tools to support understanding of the youngest. For a teenager, it is easier to understand how the body works. Self-image is very important. In some cases, we can see a sense of shame in teenagers with a parent who has impairments.

[00:06:22] **Caroline Lavallée** When a parent experiences a serious medical event, a child can take on adult responsibilities that can be quite a burden. The experts call this parentification.

[00:06:35] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** So when the parents have impairments, parentification can happen. Parentification is when a child becomes the parent of its parent. He can then play this role to help the parent who is experiencing a limitation or consequences that prevent him from functioning as before. This is not the case in all situations, but it is a possibility. When a child is parentified, it can put a lot of pressure and stress on him, so we can see behavior problems in that case.

[00:07:13] **Stephan Maighan** So for a child to become the primary caregiver, helping out financially and physically, someone that has gone through difficulties physically like this, like a stroke, to me is not how it should be, obviously, because it's very difficult. But personally, I did it very young. I had to start going around the city. I had a paper route, and so I'd get up at quarter to five, and I'd go and deliver the newspapers, and go and collect the money every Monday night. And so that was a bit extra income for my family because my mom could not work.

[00:07:52] **Caroline Lavallée** Stephan's mother was diagnosed with aphasia while in the hospital, a language disorder that leaves the affected person unable to effectively communicate.

[00:08:04] **Stephan Maighan** Some of the exercises that she had to go through, for example, initially we would show her cue cards with, let's say, a banana, and we'd want her to just pronounce the name "banana," but she couldn't. She'd say "house," and then we'd show her a house and then she'd say "dog." I became the number one interpreter in the family. Many places I would go, usually a child would

not go to those places with their parents, meaning anything that had to do with the government or work or some errands that she had to do. But I had to go because she could not communicate to the people.

[00:08:42] **Caroline Lavallée** Instead of words, Stephan and his mother used body language to communicate.

[00:08:48] **Stephan Maighan** I became really, really good at reading body language. She couldn't say much, so she would try to say something, and I'd have to guess. And she would point at things, and I would try to guess. And so later on in life, she was able to speak a little bit more, but very often we had to complete or finish her sentences. She knew what she wanted to say, but it simply just would not come out necessarily.

[00:09:09] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** To help the communication, many tools can be used like pictures or signs. Some families use a sign that shows, "okay, I need to talk". It can be in writing too, if they can write. So it is best to explore these means, and to find the means that works best for the family. There are very many ways to healthy communication, but every family works differently, so it's important to go with what is the best way for them.

[00:09:47] **Caroline Lavallée** And then there may be financial worries, something that can be stressful for both parent and child.

[00:09:56] **Stephan Maighan** What was difficult was the fact that financially, we no longer had an income, so we had to depend on social assistance or welfare, which was just a few hundred dollars per month back then. Today, I would wish that either the government or folks around could gather and help out financially, because it's very difficult for a mom to do what she needs to do as a mom for her child that goes to school and so on, or bring in caregivers if she or he cannot afford it. So ideally, I would think that more help, physical help, to help with the errands in the home and cleaning and baths and so on. That would definitely help a lot, as well as having professionals on the psychological side, but financially too. It's very difficult when you want to do things and get better and you don't have access to the funds that you need in order to hire some help.

[00:10:58] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** I think financial problems can be something that is quite impossible in this situation. So it can be a lot of stress for the parent. Sometimes we will see a child that ages very quickly in this situation because when there is only one parent, you don't have any choice.

[00:11:19] **Caroline Lavallée** For many children in this situation, professional support is the best option.

[00:11:25] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** Consulting a professional when going through this type of situation can allow the child to normalize his reaction, his emotions and leave the child a safe space to talk about his experiences. And so professional counseling can help him or her find strategies to adapt to the new reality. Better understanding of what is happening to him or her is a potential outcome.

Since the services offered are different depending on where you live, I suggest people ask their family doctor or their specialist who is treating the parent to get information on the services available in their area. But a social worker can help. School psychologists can help. If there is a professional at school, that can be a safe space for a child to see a professional in the school directly too. So, there's a lot of this support there available. For sure there are waiting lists, but it's important to ask for help when you think you need it.

[00:12:37] **Caroline Lavallée** Both Stephan and Aimee Lee would want a child going through the situation to know that they need to take time for themselves.

[00:12:48] **Stephan Maighan** So if I spoke to a child who's going through this, what I went through, I'd say, "Buddy, hang in there. You have to take care of yourself. You have to remember that you matter. Your mom or your dad needs you. Yes, but take care of numero uno. Meaning you can't just always be giving care to other people. You have to care for yourself as well. And that's a trap that happens, I guess, for most people. I know that happened to me, where you put yourself last, because you're always with the mindset that you need to do something. You're the only person around that can help.

So you always have to put your mom first and help her out, which is fine. But you cannot forget yourself. So first, hang in there. This too, shall pass. Yes, make sure you do all that you can to help your mom or your dad. They absolutely need you more than ever right now. But do not forget yourself."

[00:13:51] **Émilie Pothier-Tessier** For a child to continue to live his life as a child, to allow him to continue his activities as much as possible, to continue to invest in what makes him feel good. His life is not like before, but it is possible to have a satisfying life despite everything. We must encourage him to pursue his projects and passions so that he can see that he is able to learn to live with this new reality.

[00:14:21] **Caroline Lavallée** Thankfully, Stephan was able to shift his mindset about his situation and get his life back on a better track.

[00:14:30] **Stephan Maighan** So things started to change. I turned things around. I was older in my early twenties when I started reading a lot of books. Anything that I could get my hands on with regards to personal development, psychology, mindset, thinking. And that's when I realized that I was not necessarily what happened to me. Because as a kid, I had developed an identity to that person who was poor, unfortunate and so on. So I had developed a very strong belief system attached to that identity. But early twenties, I started realizing that, hey, you know what? Things happened and they're not pleasant. It's very unfortunate, but you are not necessarily what happened to you. And I started learning also in developing a new lexicon. So, for example, instead of saying, "well, my life is this way because my mom is paralyzed", I shifted my mindset to, "despite my mom being paralyzed, I still managed to do this".

[00:15:30] **Caroline Lavallée** While it was incredibly challenging to live through his mother's stroke, today, Stephan sees how her courage influenced the adult he became.

[00:15:40] **Stephan Maighan** If I had what she had, I don't know how I would have handled it. But the way she did, at 28 years old, being a single mom, having a young seven year old son and knowing that she's fully, fully, heavily handicapped and limited physically and mentally and still brave through life and do all that she does, I am extremely impressed.

[00:16:11] **Caroline Lavallée** Heart disease and stroke often turn a family's world upside down. When a parent becomes ill, the effects on a child can be devastating. Providing a safe space for children to talk about their emotions and how they have been affected by the event can help prevent situations where the child experiences parentification, behavioral issues and more. If you'd like more information on heart disease or stroke, please go to [heartandstroke.ca](http://heartandstroke.ca), and enter support in the search bar.

Thank you, Stephan, for sharing your story. And thank you, Émilie Pothier-Tessier, for offering your expertise.

Thanks for listening to The Beat, and a special thanks to our donors for making this podcast possible. I hope you'll take away some valuable insights from today's episode, and maybe you'll be inspired to join a community that's determined to beat heart disease and stroke. Subscribe now to stay informed, get inspired and rediscover hope.

Don't forget to rate and review the podcast so we can reach even more listeners. Stay tuned for our next episode. Until next time, I'm Caroline Lavallée.