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Rationale

Why join a support group? Do they exemplify the adage that “misery loves company?” Do cancer patients become more miserable by being exposed to the fears of others with the same illness?

Robert Watts, a football player with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, explained how joining a group of fellow cancer sufferers helped him. “When I was diagnosed, I was a professional athlete,” he recalled. “I was used to putting problems aside. I could not think about injuries when I was playing or I would get injured and instead I would picture myself doing what needed to be done, picture myself winning. That didn’t work when I found I had cancer, although I used it as my model for getting through treatment.

“It was after treatment that problems began. I would find myself getting overwhelmingly anxious, feeling tight in the chest. I remember working out in my gym at home and after fifteen seconds of skipping rope my chest tightened up; my muscles were tight from the radiation and I didn’t know how to deal with that. I was scared I was going to die. But I wasn’t allowed to be scared. It got to where I found myself driving in my car on the Golden Gate Bridge thinking, ‘Well, if death is going to get me, let’s just get it over with. I can’t live with this.’ I needed a checkup from the neck up. I called up my doctor and he said, ‘Get down here.’ Sometime during treatment, someone needs to lead you by the hand and take you to the group. I felt overwhelmed at the thought that I wasn’t the same man I was when I started treatment, that I couldn’t solve things by just working out more. I couldn’t accept being someone who was sick, who faced the risk of dying. Since I have been to the group, I have cried. I feel better because I can accept better who I am now.”

For Robert, his physical strength represented his sense of well-being. It took the experience of feeling the emotional pain caused by the disease in his body before he could reach out to others for help.

Methods

Groups provide an opportunity for people to see their own problems as others see them, through the eyes and ears of other group members. This helps them gain a new perspective on their illness and reduces the inappropriate guilt that often besets cancer patients. They learn that many of their problems are due to cancer, rather than personal failings. At other times, group members develop and consolidate their own sense of personal competence in dealing with cancer by helping others who have less experience with it. Groups can also assist in developing a more active coping stance and in finding something to do about even the worst aspects of the illness, such as fears of dying and death. Group discussions of these issues help members to experience shared anxiety and sadness. This can be invaluable to an individual who is about to sink into the despair that loneliness causes. Our 2001 book, *Group Therapy for Cancer Patients*, provides a detailed description of the methods of leading such groups.

Gaining Perspective

Many patients report a psychic numbing that characterizes their initial response to learning they have cancer. Before patients can speak fully about their grief, they need to talk together, a process characterized by Freud as “remembering, repeating, and working through.” Something therapeutic occurs when you hear your own voice while talking with others about your problems. The experience of a life threat and the need to grieve the loss of one’s health is better handled when shared with others in the same predicament. For example, perhaps you’ve always believed that life should be fair, or that “bad things do not happen to good people.” The discrepancy between this view and your present life situation conjures up many feelings, many of them negative.

When you ask yourself the question, “Why has this happened?” you’re really asking, “How

could this have happened to me?” There is a human need to find a positive purpose for a negative event. Examining old beliefs can lead to finding meaning in the new situation. Illness threatens our dreams and diminishes our illusion of autonomy and control over life. Cancer threatens the illusion that life is predictable and controllable. Group discussions can lead to the discovery of smaller but potentially controllable new domains. Taking charge of treatment decisions, family relationships, priorities in life, and managing relationships in the group can be a powerful antidote to the helplessness engendered by illness.

Some topics that frequently emerge in support groups are the impact of the cancer diagnosis, the sense of loss and grief, the overwhelming emotional reactions that overcome us from time to time, physical losses, communication problems with family and friends, the reactions of others to us, the changes in our values and goals, and a view of the meaning of life.

Expressing Emotions

The ability to be in touch with one’s feelings is a very important part of dealing effectively with the disease. Robert Watts recalls, “The greatest thing that turned me back toward my feelings is what I learned with the Survivors’ Group. One night when I was feeling bad, a young Latin woman entered the group. She had recently completed her therapy for lymphoma. She cried every time she attempted to talk about her pain. Finally, she spoke about not being able to feel good about anything, about not feeling lovable. For the first time, I heard someone talking about experiencing what I had experienced, and suddenly I realized that I was not the problem, but instead that I had a problem.”

The moments of clarity, identification, and connection that come with discussing deep concerns are part of the emotional healing process that group therapies offer cancer

patients, a process that helps patients return to a sense of inner control. Just as illness has biochemical and emotional components, healing requires emotional as well as physical assistance.

Benefits of Group Support

There is growing evidence that educational, supportive, and psychotherapeutic interventions for the medically ill can have a variety of positive effects, including distress reduction, improved coping, enhanced interaction with family and friends, improved interactions with health care professionals, and adherence to treatment. Social support also can be an important factor in mediating individuals' ability to cope with stress.

Support Groups Are Safe and Inexpensive

Support groups have proved helpful to cancer patients. For example, support groups have been shown to reduce traumatic stress symptoms, reduce other psychological symptoms and distress, improve coping, enhance disease knowledge, improve quality of life, and reduce pain. Such programs have been developed in oncology centers, private practices, and in supportive care programs. Recently, efforts have been made to establish and evaluate chat room

programs on the Internet for cancer patients and those with other medical illnesses. While maintaining quality control is a difficulty, electronic support has already opened new worlds of information for patients, and also may provide increasing amounts of emotional, as well as intellectual, support at little or no cost.

Group members often remain in touch with one another for years after their formal participation ends. Typical comments are:

"When I joined the support group, I realized I was not alone."

"I needed time to talk with others about what I had just been through."

"I thought I was healthy and then this thing came along! I felt wounded, and nobody else seemed to get it!"

"Sometimes I found that what I said seemed to register with others in the group."

"It felt so good just to get my feelings out in the open."

Cancer patients benefit from sharing their feelings with others and from finding understanding in their responses and stories about themselves. Having cancer presents an immediate life threat. Treatment offers hope as well as new problems. The life threat may subside with treatment, but many need to talk about it with others in order to reclaim a sense of inner control.