Finding Comfort Through Journaling

For many people with cancer, coping with their emotions can be just as difficult as managing their health. However, keeping a journal is an easy way to express your feelings and document your journey. Besides helping you deal with the emotional ups and downs of living with cancer, research has shown that expressing your innermost thoughts and feelings can reduce stress and promote a range of other physical, emotional, and social benefits.

Research into the effects of journaling

A number of scientific studies have found that people with cancer who express their emotions in writing may experience mental and physical benefits. Although researchers are not entirely sure why putting thoughts down on paper is so effective, it is reasonable to think that this practice allows people to process complex emotions and helps them chart a way forward and cope better with their illness.

Early research [1] into the benefits of expressive writing (writing about your deepest thoughts and feelings) for people with cancer found that women with breast cancer who wrote about all of their feelings reported the fewest symptoms and had the fewest unscheduled visits to their doctors. A more recent study [2] showed that even one twenty-minute writing session may be enough to help change the way people with cancer think and feel about their disease almost immediately. And three weeks later, it still has a positive effect on the person?s quality of life. These studies suggest that journaling might not only help people living with cancer cope with the emotions of a cancer diagnosis but also the symptoms.

Benefits of journaling

Beyond what researchers have found, keeping a journal offers many other benefits. Among the reasons to keep a journal are:

- Some people with cancer find that writing about their treatment helps them examine their thoughts and clarify their goals. In this way, the journal helps people prepare for conversations with their doctors. It can be a way to plan for scheduled appointments so the time with the doctor is as informative as possible.
- Keeping a diary during your treatment can give you a new perspective on your experience?a way to look back at a journey and understand how far you've come.
- Recording your thoughts and feelings starts a process of self-discovery and, for some, of spiritual development. Allowing yourself to think every day or every week about your feelings is a way to get to know yourself better and to understand what gives meaning to your life.
- Expressing your thoughts in a journal is a safe way to express difficult feelings, such as anger and hurt. You may eventually express those feelings out loud, but starting with your journal lets you vent your frustrations without hurting anyone or feeling like you are being judged. This may be especially helpful if you feel like you don?t have someone to confide in.
- Putting feelings of stress or frustration in writing may calm you or clear your mind. It may help you move on to more productive or happier thoughts. And while writing every day won?t get rid of fatigue [3], it may provide an effective distraction.

Getting started

Your journal is yours so you can create it any way you want. Here are some ideas for getting started:

- Writing with pen and paper is the preferred method for many journal-keepers, but some people find keeping a journal on a computer is also helpful. In addition, mobile apps for smartphones and tablets allow you to create journal entries while on the go.
- If you choose to write on paper, use permanent ink. Pick a notebook or diary that's convenient to carry around, or use a binder and carry loose paper with you.
- Date each entry and number each page.
- Determine the writing environment that works for you. If you need to concentrate, find a quiet place to write and do so without interruptions if possible.
- Write on a regular schedule or write whenever the mood strikes?it's up to you.
- You don't have to limit your journal to words on paper. You can include cards and letters you receive or e-mails you exchange with friends. Don't worry about writing a certain number of words each day; your entries can be as long or as short as you'd like.
- Write what's on your mind, not just a list of the day's events. Thoughts about your diagnosis and treatment, your hopes and fears, your goals, an amusing story?it's all fair game. The only truly important thing is that you're writing about what's important to you.
- If you are unsure where to begin, use one of these opening lines to get started: ?Today?s appointment with my doctor made me feel??, ?I am worried about??, ?I was surprised/happy/excited when??.
- Try to resist the urge to censor what you write or to be a perfectionist with grammar and spelling. Be as honest and candid as possible in your journal.
- Check your local library or bookstore for books about journaling for people with cancer that provide exercises to help you get your thoughts started. There are also a number of workshops and e-Courses that may help develop your journal writing; search for ?journal writing

workshops? online.

Blogging

Instead of writing in a personal, private journal, many people living with cancer are making their thoughts, feelings, and goals more public by writing a cancer blog. Because blogging is much more public than journaling, it not only acts as a way to cope with the highs and lows of cancer treatment but may also connect you with and help inspire other people who are going through a similar situation.

If you aren?t ready to write your own blog, you may want to read what has been written by others who have been affected by cancer. An online search using the terms ?cancer blog? will return hundreds of results.

Whether you decide to keep a journal or a blog, or feel more comfortable simply talking to friends, family, or a counselor, it is important to express the way you feel after being diagnosed with cancer. By putting your thoughts and feelings into words, you will not only be able to cope better with your experiences with cancer but will also feel more connected and supported along the way.

More Information

Caring for the Whole Patient [4]

Coping [5]

Links:
[1] http://jco.ascopubs.org/content/20/20/4160.abstract
[2] http://explore.georgetown.edu/news/?ID=31489
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25010
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/21