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Coping With Cancer Through Humor

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can trigger a number of difficult feelings, such as sadness, fear, or anger. While these feelings are completely normal, it is important to find a way to deal with them. One way to cope with these feelings is to use humor, which may help you keep a positive outlook on life, give you a renewed sense of control, and boost your body?s healing process.

Although you may feel uncomfortable embracing humor during this time, giving yourself permission to laugh is as important as giving yourself permission to cry and grieve.

The benefits of laughter

Medical benefits. A number of scientific studies have linked laughter to positive effects on the body. For example, laughter may reduce pain, improve blood vessel function, release chemicals that relax muscles and produce feelings of pleasure, and stimulate the body's immune system. However, doctors and scientists still have many questions about laughter?s effects on health that require further research.

Emotional benefits. Perhaps the greatest benefit of laughter is that it often boosts a person?s mood and feelings of wellbeing. Laughter can provide a sense of perspective when you are faced with challenging circumstances and help release pent-up emotions. It also may help reduce depression and anxiety [1] and increase hope, self-esteem, energy, and resilience.

In fact, in one study of adults with a life-limiting illness, more than half of participants said that humor helped them deal with an otherwise overwhelming situation. And more than three-quarters said that humor gave them hope. In another study, a group of people with cancer said that their doctors' use of humor gave them hope.

Cognitive benefits. Laughter appears to have a positive effect on the mind as well. It may improve memory and problem-solving abilities and spur creativity.

Social benefits. Laughter may also help you maintain a sense of connection with family members and friends. The people closest to you may not know what to say or how to act after you receive a cancer diagnosis, and humor may help ease that tension, allowing them to be more encouraging and supportive. In addition, laughter has the power to create an emotional bond between people, strengthening relationships and laying a foundation for more serious discussions at other times. Of course, you won't always feel like laughing, and that?s okay. However, when you do feel comfortable embracing humor, set the tone by saying something funny. This gives those around you permission to laugh and relax too.

Just as humor can set the tone for interactions with family members and friends, it can also help establish good communication between you and your health care team. Sharing a laugh with your doctor, nurses, and other medical staff can create an important sense of familiarity and trust.

How to find humor

Some people with cancer find humor in everyday situations that happen throughout their cancer journey, while others seek out humor in books, television, or movies. The Internet is another source of humor, particularly cancer-specific humor. If you search for "cancer humor" online, you'll find hundreds of links. Meanwhile, several hospitals and treatment centers offer ?humor therapy? or ?laugh therapy? programs, which may include visits by volunteer clowns, comedians, or other entertainers. Ask a nurse or social worker if your hospital or treatment center has a program like this.

More Information

Coping [2]

Additional Resources

Journal of Clinical Oncology: Humor and Oncology [3]

Living with cancer blog (Mayo Clinic): Using humor to help the healing [4]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/25479
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/21
[3] http://jco.ascopubs.org/cgi/content/full/23/3/645
[4] http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/humor-and-cancer/my01549