

# Emotions are key part of treatment

**E**lizabeth, a married woman and mother of two young daughters, has recently experienced a relapse of cancer.

Upon hearing the news from her physician for the second time, she became sullen. She isolated herself for two months, avoided extended family and friends and purposely dodged their visits. She couldn't imagine having to experience chemotherapy again or radiation.

Elizabeth became overwhelmed and angry. The mere idea made her tired. She struggled to find the inner strength to persevere and the hope that there was a lasting cure and she would eventually get better.

Elizabeth's reaction was similar to many others who have been diagnosed with cancer. People often feel overwhelmed and frightened. They fear loss of control, separation from loved ones and extreme pain.

As most physicians or helping professionals will state, attention to emotional well being is extremely important. At the third annual Conference of the American Oncology Society, Dr. Anderson (2006) emphasized the importance of giving quality attention to each emotional phase a cancer patient experiences. This includes: initial shock, survival mode of functioning, anxiety, coping with loss, depression, the question of whether they will recover, confronting the prospect of dying and dealing with the surge of emotions following medical treatment.

## THE HOMEFRONT



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Some people have family and friends who naturally have a propensity to "step up to the plate" and offer needed emotional care. These relationships normally engage in a reciprocating process of "give and take," which continues during times of crises. The individual is the recipient of help and is comfortable accepting it. Others look to their faith for guidance and comfort. They experience their spiritual community as a source of strength.

While cancer patients physically endure medical treatment, it is also important to keep in mind treatments available for their emotional needs. As early as 1989, Dr. Spiegel demonstrated that supportive-expressive group therapy for women with breast cancer improved their quality of life and significantly increased survival time.

Individual therapy has also been shown to be helpful for people who may be exhibiting extreme anxiety or depression. Another helpful mode of treatment is expressive therapy. An expressive therapist offers creative opportunities for emotional expression through media, such as art or journaling.

Settings that usually offer these supports are hospitals, hospice and clinical private practices. The type of treatment is often based on the person's individual needs and comfort level. Hospitals often offer a supportive environment for the

HOMEFRONT, from Page B5 individual, couple or family.

Many people will take advantage of hospital support services up to the point when the medical treatments are over. They then often wish to participate in a different setting, one that doesn't remind them of chemotherapy or radiation treatment. At this juncture the individual is trying to move beyond identifying or perceiving themselves as ill or a patient.

Following medical treatment, people will often enter individual therapy. When appointments for chemotherapy and radiation treatment have ended, people typically experience numerous emotions. In the beginning, they experience relief. This is immediately followed by questions like, "Can I trust that the cancer won't return?" They then attempt to re-enter their lives as they once knew it, before the diagnosis of cancer.

Often, as a consequence of having cancer, they see their world differently. Priorities, relationships and values often shift.

Elizabeth entered individual therapy with me just before her chemotherapy. Much of our work involved empathizing with Elizabeth's journey of survival, as well as her ongoing appraisal of her life. Through our connection she gained energy and a will to live. She then expanded her resources and enrolled in an expressive support group at a

nearby hospital. From time to time her husband and children also participated in related groups that enabled them to express their feelings and gain coping skills.

Through her treatment, Elizabeth showed courage and regained a sense of personal power. She made it through this difficult journey with the help of others, most importantly her connections with family, friends and other cancer survivors.

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