

# Helping patients live through cancer

## Psychologist offers free program

BY AMY KANE

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**NORTH HAMPTON** — Cancer can be isolating, but a free support group offered by a local psychologist may help sufferers feel less alone.

Dr. Constance Johannessen, of Woodland Professional Associates in North Hampton, initiated a support group for individuals with cancer. The group will address life changes, learn ways to communicate and express feelings, and develop coping strategies.

"When you're sick, you want to stay home. But it's helpful to get out and be with others who understand," Johannessen said.

Many people struggle emotionally with a diagnosis of cancer.

"You are going along one day and the next day your whole world changes," she said.

There are doctors' appointments, a different diet, and an intense focus on physical health and treatment. The mental and emotional aspects can take a back seat.

For 13 years, Johannessen has counseled cancer patients individually. Last year she ran a support group for caregivers. According to research, a support group can improve quality of life and may increase survival time as well. This will be Johannessen's first group for cancer patients.

She loves doing the work, she said.



Amy Kane photo

Dr. Constance Johannessen, of Woodland Professional Associates in North Hampton, has initiated a support group for individuals with cancer.

### HEALING HELP

Healing from cancer support group for individuals meets Tuesdays, from March 6 through April 24, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at Drake Hill Commons, 155 Lafayette Road, North Hampton. Free and available to all people living with cancer. Refreshments will be offered. Call to reserve a place: 964-4869.

"What is the meaning of my world? Cancer can cause you to stop and look at addressing ways people find hope and inspiration, and the ways others show themselves so loving and caring," Johannessen said.

Johannessen, who lives in Rye with her husband and has two daughters, one in college and one just graduated, began in her field in 1975 and achieved a doctorate in clinical psychology in 1992.

"In college I thought I would be a teacher, but I was intrigued with psychology," she said. Johannessen's natural compassion for others and good listening skills solidified the decision.

Last September, Johannessen enrolled in a practitioners' program at Wellesley College, the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute. The program provides advanced professionals with a two-year training experience in relational cultural theory. The new support group will integrate RCT concepts vital to the healing process — like empathy, mutuality, strength in connection and empowerment.

"We want to help empower people in disempowering situations," Johannessen said.

Recently she shadowed an oncologist at a local hospital to increase her understanding of cancer treatment.

"It was an incredible experience, to see how people hold onto hope, to watch how the staff works seamlessly and how they talk bedside," she said. "The human side, that's where my heart is."

Hospitals and hospices offer a variety of support groups for cancer patients, but Johannessen's group offers the option of a setting outside a medical environment, in the cozy offices of her practice at Drake Hill Commons in North Hampton.

The cancer support group is free of charge.

"We all need to find a way we can give," Johannessen said.