



Inspiration

Recovery and Healing in Cancer patients (Part 1)

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A patient told me recently, that being diagnosed with cancer felt as though he has been abducted by aliens to a foreign land, in which the landscape, customs, and language were a total mystery to him.

Another women diagnosed with breast cancer said she felt as if a bomb had exploded in her living room, shattering everything around the home including its occupants.

These powerful metaphors illustrate very clearly the state of mind of a person diagnosed with a potentially life threatening disease. Many hear the word 'cancer' and don't hear a word, but a sentence. A life sentence.

Even though today many of these illnesses are treatable and no longer as terminal as they used to be, the emotions associated are often overwhelming.

Imagine your routines, your daily comforts, your plans are suddenly blown away like confetti. This is a profound loss, since one way of defining our very personality is the sum of our habits.

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Think about the last time you were sick... I bet that your physical disease, the abnormality in structure or function, didn't disturb you as much as the disease's effects on your experience - your pain and fear, your anger, lack of control, inconvenience, frustration, or some other essentially emotional process. And it's always all very real and absolutely unique to you.

Sickness alters the way our bodies function, and it also makes us feel terrible. The "disease" is a tangible, measurable event, open to medical science's interventions. The sick person's experience of being sick, isn't a physical, visible, measurable phenomenon, but it's no less real than the disease.

With cancer for example, the disease consists of the tumour - its location, size, stage, cellular characteristics, x-ray findings, and so on. In contrast, the experience of having cancer is just that, an experience.

"Illness" includes, then, the sick person's fear, anxiety, depression, anger, isolation, despair, and so on - in other words, his suffering. Doctors promote a cure, which is a physical process of tissue restoration; suffering requires

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healing, which is best described as the attainment of inner peace. Both are linked and essential to well-being, since every sick person lives with both the physical disease AND their emotional experience of the disease.

Healing can indeed promote cure. We've known since the 1930s, from the research of Hans Selyé and many others, that stress holds back the immune system. We know that all else being equal, patients who feel hopeless and helpless will plummet, and those who feel hopeful and in control will do measurably better.

As we subjectively feel better, our physiology acts more healthily. Our immune system mimics our attitude. In sum, as we heal, our body drives toward a cure.

But you might have intuitively known this with no research at all... recalling your own experience, where would you predict your arthritis would be more likely to flare, at your child's wedding or while being audited by SARS?

A patient has a greater potential to react well to treatment if they feel heard, recognised and understood both on the physical and emotional levels. They are on their journey to healing when they experience their suffering and make their way through it as skilfully as possible, and it is toward this process of developing resilience, access coping strategies and reducing stress, that I direct my efforts.

By recognising that the newly diagnosed person is devastated and possibly feeling afraid, confused, sad and angry, we are 'giving permission' and normalising expression of those feelings and allow to treat not only their physical discomfort and pain but also their emotional suffering.