

CANCER SURVIVORS

SYMPOSIA SERIES II

Issues & Solutions for Life After Cancer

Healing the Spirit After Cancer

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Finding Hope & Meaning After Cancer

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Dr. Bellizzi is a behavioral scientist and program director in the Office of Cancer Survivorship in the National Cancer Institute. He is also a 13-year cancer survivor. His primary research interests in the area of survivorship include the impact of aging, resiliency and quality of life after cancer. He is a member of the Bristol-Meyers Squibb 2005 Tour of Hope National Team with Lance Armstrong and he received a governor's citation in recognition for his commitment to cancer control efforts.

Dr. Bellizzi graduated from college with a degree in business and was pursuing a career as a management consultant when he was diagnosed with stage three testicular cancer just a few days prior to his 25th birthday. The cancer had spread to his lymph nodes, lungs and was on its way his brain, giving him only a 50% chance of survival. Just three months after this diagnosis, doctors also discovered a cancerous tumor in his left kidney—an entirely different cancer diagnosis. After several operations, several rounds of aggressive chemotherapy and much time in the hospital, Dr. Bellizzi did beat his cancer and decided to dedicate himself to the cancer cause. He returned to school and earned two masters degrees and a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies. He now works in the Office of Cancer Survivorship studying how the cancer experience affects a variety of aspects of survivors' lives.

The Office of Cancer Survivorship was established in 1996 by Congress in recognition of the large number of individuals now surviving cancer for long periods of time and their unique—and poorly understood—needs. The mission of OCS is to enhance not only the length of life but the quality of life of cancer survivors by championing research that focuses on understanding, preventing or reducing the burden of cancer on individuals. OCS also educates health professionals, cancer survivors and their families.

Cancer is no longer a uniformly fatal disease. It is now more often a disease that many people will live with, which has forced the medical community to start thinking about the implications of living with cancer. The focus has shifted from not only just treating the disease, but managing some of the late and

long-term side effects of the disease. Psychosocial needs such as managing fears of recurrence, anxiety, distress, depression, relationship issues, and employment issues are also getting much more attention.

There are various ways that individuals integrate the cancer experience into their everyday life. Cancer is a very unique and personal experience and there is no right or wrong way to respond to such an illness. Research tells us that some people desire to go back to normal following cancer, and that the experience is not a big part of their identity. This sentiment is more common in men than women, and is more common in diseases with favorable prognoses.

For some, cancer actually can be a positive experience. For others, the most difficult part of the cancer experience is after treatment ends. Transitioning back to a life without what sometimes becomes a comforting process of treatment can be difficult and scary.

Finding meaning in the cancer experience can be an important part of the healing process. Some people seek to understand why they became ill—not in the scientific sense, but in a higher, more spiritual sense that can enable a survivor to understand what having had cancer means to their life now; how to integrate their experience into their life experience and move forward. Taking time to focus on this can be a coping strategy that helps survivors deal with some of the uncertainty and fear that surrounds the disease.

The process of finding meaning often takes survivors beyond their everyday boundaries and can require tools that have not been a part of life before. It requires a person to think about areas of life that may not have been examined in a while. That can be a scary, but important process. The timing of this process varies greatly—some search for meaning within weeks of diagnosis, but the majority really explore the meaning following treatment, once they are more focused on the future as opposed to the daily trials and tribulations of the cancer treatment.

Finding meaning can be positive, causing survivors to make positive changes in their lives such as growing closer to their family, changing health behaviors, re-evaluating priorities in life, changing career path, and even a recognition of inner strength and a confidence in skills to manage future life crises. Changes in spirituality and religion also often result.

Tips for exploring meaning after cancer:

- Take a new look at old patterns, values and priorities
- Focus on areas in life where a change may be needed
- Keep a journal to record thoughts and progress on changes
- Create short, medium and long-term goals and track your progress
- Talk with other survivors, clergy, friends and support groups
- Take part in research studies

- Help others who have cancer

It is important to strike a balance between thinking about your cancer and moving forward in life. If thinking about cancer causes a great deal of anxiety or distress, then perhaps professional counseling is in need.

It's also important to remember that finding meaning and positive changes after cancer is NOT a necessary part of the adjustment process. Some survivors do not feel inclined to do so. But it is important for cancer survivors, family members and health professionals to be aware that many survivors do feel a need to explore the meaning of their experience in their lives and that it can be of value to explore these feelings further.