

Ease Cancer Stress, Anxiety with 'Emotional Wellness Toolbox'

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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Pioneering Psychotherapist Shares 3 Strategies that Work

A not-so-surprising new study shows stress reduces the effectiveness on drugs on prostate cancer, and even accelerates the disease's development.

"More than 150 million Americans will be diagnosed with cancer this year and how they deal with it can have a dramatic effect on their physical and emotional health," says pioneering cancer psychotherapist Dr. Niki Barr, author of "Emotional Wellness: The Other Half of Treating Cancer" (www.canceremotionalwellbeing.com).

While the mind-body connection in fighting disease is well-documented, the new study by Wake Forest Baptist Medical Centers reveals just how damaging anxiety and stress can be, Barr says.

The study found that mice implanted with human prostate cancer cells responded well to treatment when they were kept calm and stress free. But when the mice were stressed, their cancer cells didn't die and tumor growth was unchecked. In another test, mice that were repeatedly stressed actually had tumors get larger.

The researchers found that stress and anxiety set off a chemical chain reaction that affects the cancer cells.

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“So finding ways to ease the stress associated with cancer is vital,” says Barr, who has dedicated her practice to cancer patients and their families since 2007 after more than 15 years in counseling. “And part of what causes that anxiety is the feeling that you’ve lost all control of your life.”

To return some of that control to patients, she created the “emotional wellness toolbox,” a checklist of activities and tangible items her patients use to help maintain a positive attitude and sense of well-being through treatment.

Here are a few of them:

- **Diagnosis:** Anxiety begins here and, according to the National Cancer Institute, “Anxiety may increase pain, affect sleep and cause nausea and vomiting,” among other problems. Learning to reduce anxiety from the outset can minimize physical pain and discomfort throughout the illness and treatment. Tangible tools include writing materials, a device for favorite music, CD's for guided meditation or relaxation, and a box to hold these materials. Cancer patients and their families can use them to focus for navigating psychologically through cancer. “A simple technique for immediate relief from anxiety is ‘triangle breathing,’” Barr says. “Breathe in, breathe out, then pause— during which you say a word such as ‘calm,’ ‘peace,’ ‘confident;’ it’s remarkably effective!”

- **Medical treatment – depression and the unknown:** Approximately 25 percent of cancer patients are clinically depressed, she says. By the time of treatment, which is sometimes a gamble in itself, the diagnosis has had more time to settle in, which can throw emotions into a tailspin. Just a few of the tools for battling depression include being proactive in understanding the treatment, maintaining a healthy routine, taking a break from “cancer talk,” creating affirmations – true statements – that keep one moving forward, and keeping a journal.

- **Back to “normal”?** ... After a diagnosis that can feel like being run over by a truck and a cavalcade of tests and treatments, suddenly the whirlwind of cancer “just sort of ends,” Barr says. Shifting gears – again – can be dizzying. Finding your center and moving forward with intention is a great way back to a regular routine. The first step is to collate all records of treatment, including upcoming visits; this puts the recent past and future into context. Next, decide on the kind of life you want to live from here; perhaps a healthier diet and more exercise was a promise made during treatment. Now is the time to make good on it!

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"These tips are gathered from working with cancer patients and their families, taking what is most effective to share with other cancer patients and their families," Barr says. "Sometimes cancer returns; and, sadly, some do not survive cancer."

"Regardless of the severity of a diagnosis, however, there are good and bad ways to navigate this disease – that should be the primary concern, along with treatment, when you or a loved one are diagnosed."

About Niki Barr, Ph.D. (@NikiBarrPhD)

Niki Barr, Ph.D. founded a pioneering psychotherapy practice dedicated to working with cancer patients in all stages of the disease, along with their family members, caregivers and friends. In her book, she describes an "emotional wellness toolbox" patients can put together with effective and simple strategies, ready to use at any time, for helping them move forward through cancer. Dr. Barr is a dynamic and popular speaker, sharing her insights with cancer patients and clinicians across the nation.