## **How to Navigate a Cancer Diagnosis**

Written by Ginny Grimsley Wednesday, 24 July 2013 14:29

Pioneering Psychotherapist Shares Strategies for Managing Anxiety & Maintaining Emotional Wellness

Unlike many of the most important events in one's life – graduation, marriage, having a child – almost no one anticipates a cancer diagnosis.

This year, nearly 239,000 U.S. men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer and more than 232,000 women will learn they have breast cancer, according the American Cancer Society. Over their lifetimes, nearly half of all men can expect a cancer diagnosis, and more than a third of women.\*

"Thankfully, we now have many tools for detecting cancers early and treating them successfully. But learning you have cancer remains one of life's most frightening and stressful experiences," says cancer psychotherapist Dr. Niki Barr, author of "Emotional Wellness, The Other Half of Treating Cancer," ( canceremotionalwellbeing.com ).

"Developing ways to help patients address their emotional well-being throughout their medical journey, still lag behind medical advances, but physicians and psychologists recognize that healing improves when both the physical and emotional needs of patients are served."

In her years of clinical practice working exclusively with cancer patients and their loved ones, Barr developed an Emotional Wellness Toolbox that patients stock with what Barr has found to be the most effective tools.

Here are some of her tools for managing anxiety - a normal and emotionally healthy response to a cancer diagnosis, but one that can spiral out of control.

- Catch your anxious thoughts. Stop anxious thoughts thoughts about fear, unease and worry -- before they lead to anxiety. Start by writing your thoughts down on individual note cards and identifying the first one that's leading to you feeling anxious. Then the next one. When you've identified all of your anxious thoughts, go back to the first one and, on the card, write a new thought that will not make you feel anxious. It should be a thought that is confident and empowering. Continue down the list and do the same for each anxious thought.
- Erase 'what if' thinking. What if the cancer has spread? What if the treatment doesn't work? One 'what if' leads to another and often spirals into anxiety. Be aware when you start asking 'what if' and instead ask yourself, "Is this thought helping me or hurting me?" and "Is this thought moving me forward or backward?"

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- Ground yourself. Interrupt a chain of anxious thoughts by focusing on details around you. Look at the color of the walls in the room you're in; take in the pictures on the walls, the books on the shelves and the titles on their spines; look at the person you're talking to, the color of their eyes, the clothes she's wearing. Being very focused on external details can derail anxious thoughts.
- Use distraction. Choose a favorite place and visit it. Absorb everything about it the colors, smells, any people involved, the sounds, tastes, how it feels. Build it up very clearly in your mind, going over and over it, so it can become a distraction tool. When you're waiting for a medical test or procedure, undergoing a procedure, or any other time you need to "be" somewhere else, call up your distraction and visit.

Other tools for your box include meditation CDs that use guided imagery; favorite music CDs; and a journal to record your thoughts and feelings.

"Being able to manage your anxiety enables you to move forward through cancer whether patient, caregiver or family member," Barr says. "Don't tell yourself you can't handle whatever you're going through. Yes, you can ... five minutes at a time."

\*The data does not include non-melanoma skin cancers, the most common diagnosis.

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.