

FIGHTING STRESS ON ALL FRONTS: BODY, SOUL & SPIRIT

Cancer can be stressful, both to patients and caregivers. From that first test through diagnosis and treatment, every step along the way is a journey into the unknown.

When people experience high levels of stress or experience stress repeatedly over a long period of time, it may be considered chronic stress. This can certainly occur on a cancer journey — research shows that this stress may weaken immune system and impede the body's ability to heal, potentially causing a variety of physical health problems and reducing their quality of life.

So, as Cancer Care Ministers, it is important that we help patients fight stress when we can—body, soul and spirit.

Although stress is largely psychological in nature, much of the damage it can do is physical. So, in addition to addressing with mental, emotional and spiritual causes of stress, it can be beneficial to take direct action in areas that can make a physical difference.

Some of the obvious physical symptoms of stress—muscle aches and tension, digestive problems, difficulty sleeping—may be improved with a little exercise. Something as simple as going for a walk can help. Or with a doctor's guidance, a patient might safely benefit from a more engaged exercise program.

A healthy, well-balanced diet is important for someone battling cancer to help support the body nutritionally and provide energy. Since the body heals as we sleep, sufficient daily rest is also important. Eating well and getting plenty of sleep is likely to brighten the patient's general outlook.

SOUL

The stress that cancer patients feel is real. The physical, emotional, social and spiritual challenges that accompany the disease can at times feel overwhelming. But there are ways that a cancer patient may alleviate at least some of their mental and emotional stress.

Many patients find that positive connections with other people may reduce stress. These interactions can take many forms—talking with family and friends, meeting with a counselor or minister, or gathering with a small group. Studies show that as someone receives emotional and social support, the level of stress hormones in the brain is reduced. Positive connections also appear to help reduce levels of depression and anxiety, and reduce disease-related and treatment-related symptoms among patients.

So, when someone offers to help a cancer patient with meals, household tasks, taking them to their treatments, just simply sitting and visiting or run an errand, accepting this help can be a double-blessing—the relational connection may likely reduce the patient's stress, and at the same time, a practical need is met.

Cancer patients can often bring down their stress level by doing something positive and enjoyable—by engaging in their favorite hobbies and interests, by participating in rewarding activities with others or by themselves, or by watching a movie, reading a book and listening to music. Or by just having some fun.

Since cancer brings enough stress, patients should be encouraged to set some boundaries as needed to protect themselves from people, activities or situations that provoke additional stress. Positive connections can help; negative connections do not. Cancer patients may also benefit from broadening their perspective—some of the fears they have about cancer may be reduced by learning more about their disease.

In those rare cases where the stress level threatens to become debilitating or destructive for the patient, the involvement of a preacher, social worker, clinical health psychologist or psychiatrist may be appropriate. A patient may also benefit from medications prescribed for depression or anxiety.

SPIRIT

Cancer patients may also benefit from spiritual support to help manage their stress.

Prayer can be a powerful stress reducer. The Bible says, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6)

Cancer patients may at times even feel forsaken by God, so we should encourage them to realize that this is not true—the Lord invites us all to seek him in our times of distress. *“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”* (1 Peter 5:7)

Meditation on Scripture is also a time-honored antidote to stress. *“Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither...”* (Psalm 1:1-3)

As we meditate on Scripture, our stress dissipates as our awareness of God increases and as our focus shifts from uncertainty and fear to the goodness and grace of God. When stress begins to rise, even a few moments of quiet reflection may be enough to refresh the most troubled spirit.

The big lie of cancer is that there is no hope. The stress that often results from feelings of hopelessness and helplessness may weaken the body’s immune system and impact the healing process. This makes every effort to reduce and manage stress worthwhile, and as Cancer Care Ministers, we should do what we can to help our patients fight their battle against stress on every front—body, soul and spirit.

In Christ,

James & Teri Boone