

The link
Between
Support Group
and
Success
is
Very Strong

Support Groups and Cancer Survival

By DANIEL GOLEMAN

PRELIMINARY evidence with breast-cancer patients has suggested that those who take part in support groups have a better survival rate. Now a new study, on patients being treated for early stages of skin cancer, suggests that being part of a support group increased their chance of survival threefold over a five-year period.

Among 34 patients who participated in a psychological support group, there were seven recurrences of melanoma with three deaths after five years. In a comparison group of 34 patients there were 13 recurrences with 10 deaths, according to results of a study published yesterday in The Archives of General Psychiatry. The study was led by Dr. Fawzy I. Fawzy, a psychiatrist at the University of California at Los Angeles medical school.

The patients in the study were all being treated for melanoma, a virulent skin cancer that has a high survival rate if skin growths are surgically removed in the early stages, before the cancer has spread extensively; no further treatment like chemotherapy or radiation is then needed unless the cancer returns. All the patients in the study were randomly assigned to an experimental group or a comparison group after surgical removal of early growths.

The 34 patients in the support group met for an hour and a half once a week for six sessions. In group meetings they got practical advice about things like how to

protect their skin from the sun to cut chances of recurrence and also learned methods for managing anxiety and depression and coping with their reactions to the disease. They also gave each other support as they went through emotional crises. Patients in the comparison group received standard advice from their doctors. Importance of Attitude

"Attitude was crucial," Dr. Fawzy said. "Those who did not feel they were crippled by the disease were better able to be active copers, doing what they had been told to protect themselves from the sun, seeing their doctors as often as they needed to."

Those who survived after five years tended to be among those most distressed at the beginning of the study, but they were also more likely to be taking practical and psychological measures to handle their distress. The report concluded that those patients who felt least threatened were at greatest risk for a recurrence, perhaps because they lacked motivation to take necessary precautions like using sunscreen.

"The survivors had a positive attitude, even in the first few months," Dr. Fawzy said. "They thought they could lick their disease and continued living as fully as possible, as though they had a future, keeping working, getting married, having kids."

The study also found a tantalizing though small physiological change: six months after the group sessions ended, two-thirds of the patients in the support groups showed an increase of 25 percent or more in what are called natural killer cells, cancer-fighting cells in the immune system. No such increase was found in members of the comparison group.

But cancer specialists say the evidence for a direct physiological effect is preliminary at best. The changes were "quite small," and not in the range

oncologists would find to be of clinical importance, said Dr. Jimmie Holland, chief psychiatrist at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Dr. Fawzy's intervention with the cancer patients was very short -- just six weeks -- compared with the one-year weekly support groups in a 1989 study of women with metastatic breast cancer. In that study, conducted by Dr. David Spiegel at Stanford University medical school, the women in the support groups lived 36 months on average, compared with 18 months for those in comparison groups with similar medical care.

"Dr. Fawzy's work, along with Dr. Spiegel's findings, demonstrate to us that social support is a powerful way to move people toward health," said Dr. Steven Weiss, a senior scientific adviser at the Behavioral Medicine Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health in Rockville, Md. "Whether this works through changing mood and life style, or through changes in the immune system is unclear. But that question may not be so important from a practical point of view."

The point is that it works

Dr. Weiss added: "Time and again cancer patients say they feel so alone, because those around them aren't comfortable talking about their illness. I hope oncologists will look at this data and think of referring their patients to groups like these."