

healingwords



BY MARK W. McCLURE, MD, MEDICAL EDITOR

mind over matter

Do I believe that there is a relationship between mind and health? The answer is an unequivocal “yes.” That response is affirmed for me every day, as I have the honor and privilege of helping people in their own journeys of health and discovery. There is abundant evidence that the mind can also improve the quality of life and survival of cancer patients.

Researchers compared the survival and quality of life among 29 men with early stage prostate cancer. Men who attended at least five out of six specially designed support group meetings were compared against a matched group of 65 men who didn’t attend these meetings.

Attendees at the support meetings discussed seven different topics: (1) The effect of one’s belief’s, feelings and attitudes on health; (2) mental relaxation and imagery techniques; (3) nutrition and exercise; (4) stress management; (5) self-esteem and spirituality; (6) receptive imagery/intuition and problem solving, and; (7) creating a personal health plan/goal setting. The men attending the meetings were also given an audiotape on guided imagery and were encouraged to read several books on the same topic.

The results were astounding. The treatment group not only enjoyed a better quality of life, they lived twice as long as the control group. These findings were duplicated by another group of researchers in Chicago who reported that a similar program doubled the survival of men with advanced prostate cancer that had spread to other parts of the body.

Mind-body medicine and healthy dietary choices can also slow PSA doubling time—a measure of prostate cancer growth rate. Prostate cancer can double in size as quickly as every two weeks or as slowly as every five years or longer. Faster growing tumors, especially those with dividing times less than 12 months, are more likely to cause signs and symptoms and premature death if left untreated. Researchers selected a small group of men with prostate cancer that had evidence of a “PSA recurrence,” which is a sign of recurrent prostate cancer, following surgical removal of the prostate. These men had a

rapid PSA doubling time of six months. The men were divided into two groups. One group of men engaged in a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program and adopted a plant-based diet. Another group of men were carefully followed but did not participate in a special treatment program. Although the results are preliminary, men in the treatment group slowed their PSA doubling time by almost 300 percent from every six months to every 17 months, whereas the control group’s PSA doubling time remained essentially unchanged.

From a broader perspective, the way a person perceives and reacts to a cancer diagnosis influences his or her quality of life and survival. One of these traits is regarding illness (cancer) as a gift—as a turning point in their lives. Appreciating the wisdom of this concept—cancer as a gift—requires much soul-searching. For some, the connection is easy to see—they’ve been cured of their cancers. For others, especially those with incurable disease, the blessing may elude them.

At any rate, whether cancer is seen as a blessing or not, I encourage my patients to reflect upon what really matters in their lives and to not sweat the small things. Scientific research suggests that the following traits also offer a survival advantage: Not taking ‘no’ for an answer; actively searching for help; seeking out others who have been healed from their type of cancer; forming constructive partnerships with health professionals; finding a purpose in life; cultivating self-acceptance; avoiding constant thoughts about undesirable developments; cultivating a balanced optimism; and not hesitating to make radical life changes.

Finally, it’s important to distinguish between a cure and healing. A cure is the complete absence of disease for the rest of one’s life. Doctors hope to bring a cure to men that they treat for prostate cancer. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. Healing, on the other hand, is always possible. Healing is an inner process that takes place on an emotional, mental, and spiritual level. **h&h**

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