

Finding Hope Beyond the Pall of a Pancreatic Cancer Diagnosis: What Can We Do to Help?

Liz Ezra, LCSW, OSW-C, Pancreatic Program Coordinator at CancerCare®

Oncology social workers understand that with every cancer diagnosis one’s sense of mortality is damaged and threatened.

A pancreatic cancer diagnosis strikes a distinct and palpable fear in most hearts and minds. This diagnosis abruptly shatters one’s sense of equilibrium and leaves the patient and their support circle scared and desperate. NCI reports that in the United States, pancreatic cancer is the fourth deadliest cancer and it has a reputation of being aggressive and hard to treat. This can have a negative impact on patients and caregivers as they search and wait for some semblance of hope in adjusting to the shock of the diagnosis and what lies ahead.

Oncology social workers can support clients and their loved ones in creating a balanced response to the diagnosis in order to begin to remove the stigma and become re-engaged with life. It is often from these vulnerable places that rich transformational work emerges. This is where clients often find a new sense of hope. This is where we can begin to encourage the dying to live. Helping clients redefine hope is a central goal.

As oncology social workers, we understand that a client’s resilience and inner strength can be a very powerful antidote to despair and hopelessness. Learning how to identify the client’s existing coping skills and ego strengths and then reflecting those unique characteristics back to the client is the initial critical intervention to shift the course of a client’s quality of life in living with pancreatic cancer. Encouraging conversations, through life review, can embolden patients and caregivers to re-envision and make innovative, powerful connections. Clients can be empowered to make changes or to see the possibility of change. We can help them to believe that they do have time to make a difference.

According to Merriam-Webster, hope is “to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true.” Hope is being used as a verb and so it implies an action.

But when clients say they need/want to find hope, they are describing hope as a noun or as the dictionary defines it:

- The feeling of wanting something to happen and thinking that it could happen;
- A feeling that something good will happen or be true;
- The chance that something good will happen;
- Someone or something that may be able to provide help; and
- Someone or something that gives you a reason for hoping.

Clients are hoping that there is the possibility that something good could happen, meaning that the cancer will at least stop growing or stop causing pain or simply disappear. This is the emotional response to the situation. This is where the work begins. This is where we begin to introduce the idea of re-defining hope or finding new dreams; we are planting the seeds that will bring new life and change. These changes may alter how clients view themselves and their situation. How I am feeling right now may not be forever; something could change; there is the possibility for a better future; there is a possibility for a future.

As we are building a therapeutic relationship we are providing hope; later we may need to help clients see hope as a concept that is always changing. The therapeutic relationship needs an atmosphere of trust, respect and openness to grow. A strong therapeutic relationship is essential when broaching difficult subjects. We need to provide a meditative attitude using patience, gentleness and compassion.



SEEDS WE CAN USE TO CULTIVATE HOPE

Transformation
Joy
Replenish
Acceptance
Understanding

Comfort
Peace
Healing
Building Bridges
Forgiveness
Resiliency

Compassion
Humanity
Growth
Change
Cycles

Weeds will grow in any garden and suffocate what is green and thriving. Negative thoughts, exhaustion, resentment, anger, shame and disappointment are potent adversaries to hope. Oncology social workers watch for these intruders and try to minimize the damage they can set into motion. We can only hope.



What pancreatic patients say they are looking for in my telephone support group:

- To live well today
- Help dealing with the new “wait and see” game
- Help dealing with the ups and downs
- Help accepting being dependent

What they say and what they want:

- This diagnosis gets in your face
- Nothing is the same
- Don't write me off

What do the caregivers say in my online group?:

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| • I'm going to be a widow | • I'm overwhelmed |
| • I'm devastated | • I get annoyed by such little things now |
| • I can only do this day by day | • I'm numb |
| • I can't do this anymore | • My role has changed |
| • I feel helpless | • He's not my dad anymore |
| • I hate watching him suffer | • I'm lonely |
| • No one understands | |

“I pray for a miracle, of course, but considering the odds...I don’t know quite what to hope for...longer life with pain or shorter life with less suffering? My husband says, ‘When I get better, we’ll get back to a normal life.’ As I nod in agreement, my heart sinks through the floor.”

“The unknown future is almost more than you can deal with at times. You just try to keep going.”

“I find that some people...ones that we have known, but not well, are very kind and offer help, but don’t have a clue what we are actually going through.”

“I ask myself daily, is it best to fight on? What are the chances he will make it until there is something better that may be a cure? I get on my computer and research diet, best doctors, etc., and there is not a lot of hope coming from anywhere. How do you keep the hope, the attitude that says every day is important?”

“Our minds are an amazing piece of work. It shuts down when needed or revs up when required. It can go to a place to give us peace when we need it or can help us release the tension when appropriate. And I know we have ALL been in control of it during this process. We have told it to be strong and when to let us be weak. It's told us when to question and when to remain quiet. It's taught us how to comfort others and how to comfort ourselves. So many new roads that most of us have never traveled, yet somehow we are navigating and not going crazy. We WILL survive this!!!!”