

When Cancer Patients Are Told to “Stay Positive!!”



By
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So many of my cancer patients come to me with worries about how to stay positive. We hear it all the time—that cancer patients have to keep a positive outlook, that negative thoughts can make the cancer come back, or that staying positive is the only way they can beat cancer. This is known as the “tyranny of positive thinking,” a term coined by Dr. Jimmie Holland, the founder of the field of psycho-oncology. Dr. Holland recognized that, when cancer patients are

told that they must stay positive in order to be healthy, they are burdened with an added pressure at a time when they are least equipped to manage it.

Positive thinking generally makes us feel better. But it is nearly impossible to only have positive thoughts, especially when faced with a life-threatening illness. The physical and psychological burdens of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and ongoing side effects are difficult enough to navigate. Negative thinking did not cause your cancer, and it will not interfere with your treatment.

It is normal to have both positive and negative thoughts. Fear, anger, sadness, and guilt are all normal human emotions, as are happiness, joy,

excitement, and relief. We can experience all of these emotions safely, though some are more uncomfortable than others. We need not fear our emotional experiences or think that these normal expressions will interfere with our treatment.

For those who are concerned about staying positive, find thoughts, activities, relationships and experiences that help produce those “feel-good” emotions. When a negative emotion arises, allow it to take its natural course. All emotions are temporary, and we don’t have to add additional stress by worrying about which emotions we should or shouldn’t have. Seek psychological support services to help you navigate the emotional journey of the cancer experience.

Psychotherapy and support groups can be very helpful as you find your way through this difficult time.

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on staff at Doylestown Hospital and on the Board of Directors of The Cancer Support Community of Greater Philadelphia. Dr. Ginsberg has worked with individuals, couples, and corporations to help people take control of their lives, make better life choices, learn good coping skills and decision-making skills, and live happier, more fulfilling lives.

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