

WHY A SUPPORT GROUP WORKS: A RATIONALE

All forms of cancer support, and especially support groups with other cancer patients, causes beneficial emotional, social, psychological and physical effects. Anecdotal case studies, including cases of unexplained recovery, have suggested a strong link between the physical cancer and the patient's mental well being for years (Cousins, 1979; Hirshberg & Barasch, 1995; Siegel, 1986, 1990; Moyers, 1993; H. Benjamine, 1993).

Other physical and emotional benefits derived from cancer support are well documented in the medical literature (Holland, 1990; Rancour, 1993; Cella, 1990; Fawzy, 1995). These include significant reduction of a wide variety of symptoms such as pain, nausea, vomiting, insomnia, anxiety and depression. Researchers have also found that patients report using less pain medication, have improved appetites, better sleep patterns and overall, report a higher quality of life (Temoshok, 1985, 1987; Ramirez, 1989; Spiegel, 1983, 1985; Cassileth, 1988).

More recent research (Spiegel et. al., 1989 & 1992; Richardson et. al. 1990; Fawzy et. al. 1990, 1993) has demonstrated that when cancer patients come together in social support groups and talk about their illness, share information, express feelings, and give comfort and advice to others, they actually live longer than patients who stoically fight the disease alone. This new dramatic research no longer leaves any doubt of the value in providing psychooncology (cancer support) services to individuals with cancer. The exact reasons why cancer support results in increased quality and longevity of life is unknown. It is hypothesized, however, that the beneficial effects may be the result of a positive impact on the immune system that takes place when psychosocial support is given (Shavit, 1991; Brown & Fromm, 1987; Glaser & Glaser, 1991). In addition, patients who participate in support services usually make significant life style changes that impact on the course of the disease.

Whatever the reasons, modern science is providing hard evidence that cancer support is a critical component in an individual's successful fight for recovery.

David Wadner, Ph.D., 1997