

Why Support Groups Work

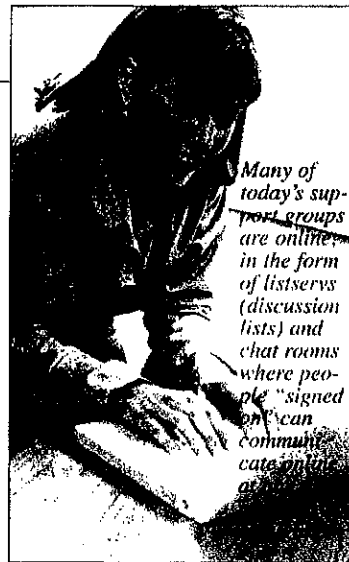
One of the most isolating, distancing aspects of a cancer diagnosis is a sense of being cut off from the rest of the "normal" world of people who do not have cancer. Suddenly you are different, facing an unknown and frightening future – and you may feel very alone and frightened. The rest of the world roars on, leaving you on the sidelines.

Now that veil of isolation can be lifted. The advent of patient support groups, in person and online, throughout the country has helped many people with cancer gain support and strength to cope with the disease. Through support groups, the cancer patient community has gained strength and momentum as people make use of this relatively new resource to interact. Additionally, research has shown that patient support groups improve the quality of life for many people who participate in them.

It's important to know that you are not hurting yourself or your chances for a full recovery if you do not choose to attend or participate in a support group. Support groups are helpful for many people but are not right for everyone.

In general, support groups, moderated or unmoderated, online or face-to-face, offer information, emotional support, a place to learn, coping skills, an opportunity to share personal experiences, a means to reduce anxiety and fear, and an opportunity to improve quality of life.

At their core, support groups work because people who enjoy participating in them find themselves understood and



Many of today's support groups are online, in the form of listservs (discussion lists) and chat rooms where people "signed on" can communicate.

welcomed. While there are many individual reasons people find value in support groups of different kinds, there are some universal benefits.

Support groups allow you to both give and receive. It's a way to contribute as well as be given to, and this can be a welcome relief in a time where you feel dependent on others much of the time.

Groups can be an excellent source of in-

formation about care and other issues that too often don't get addressed in the doctor's office or a clinic visit where the pressure of time dominates much of what happens.

Despite fears that advice and information from non-medical personnel will prove inaccurate, many support groups have found that people offering information tend to be well-informed and relatively reliable. Moderated or facilitated groups often have the ability to correct inaccurate or misleading information. It is important, however, to always check with your healthcare team about information you receive in a support group to be sure it's correct and complete.

Role models abound in support groups – in person and online. You are with people who have, to some extent, walked in your shoes. Their strength and ability to cope can inspire and comfort you. Their behavior can mark the path throughout the course of your disease.

A strong sense of community is present in a good support group. You feel your problems are not unique in the world, that others have coped, that you have friends in the group who can advise, care and help. Some participants comment that their support groups, including those online, feel like a "family."

Attending a support group or participating online is something personal that you do to care only for yourself. It is a time of day or of the week that is private and personal in a world that is often filled by treatments and appointments and managing side effects.

Your support group can give your family and caregivers a break from your feelings. Many survivors fault themselves for talking too much with loved ones about their cancer, their fears and their needs. You weary of being what you consider to be a burden, adding concern to those who love you and are also upset and worried. Time spent with a support group, in person or online, is an opportunity to shift some of the burden to others who understand your need and can help. ■