

# Cancer: A Silver Lining?

June 22 2009

---

(PhysOrg.com) -- Cancer-the word resonates in people's nightmares and strikes fear in the hearts of millions. Can there be a positive side amidst the panic, anxiety and hopeless feelings that often accompany the word? The answer is yes according to Dr. Patricia Mumby, associate professor Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences Department and director of Loyola Cardinal Bernadine Cancer Center Psychosocial Oncology Service.

“When we first ask people to find something good about having [cancer](#) they pause and give us a puzzled look, but a majority of cancer survivors and patients can find positives. The longer it's been since their diagnosis the more positives they can find,” said Mumby. “It's amazing to watch as they look for benefits. They mentally make a shift and start to have a broader perspective. People who can find positives early on often have less anxiety overall.”

Though research is preliminary, staff at the Loyola University Health System Cardinal Bernadine Cancer Center have discovered that finding benefits and positives in the cancer experience may improve a patient's quality of life and relationships with others. They appear to have a greater appreciation for life, deeper spirituality and often find changes in their life values. It can also build self-esteem and self-confidence.

“People who are going through cancer treatments have to face challenges head-on and when they are able to master them and move forward, that builds self-esteem. Coping and adapting to life stresses builds self-confidence,” said Mumby.

Another commonly found positive is that people who are being treated for cancer improve their [health behaviors](#), often making them healthier than they were before their diagnosis.

“Some of the behaviors people have prior to their [cancer treatment](#) may put them at risk for recurrence, secondary types of cancer or other health issues. Cancer can be a scary wake-up call causing people to change many of their unhealthy behaviors and may help them to realize the importance of taking care of themselves,” said Mumby.

According to Mumby a recent study of health outcomes and quality of life of breast cancer survivors at Loyola showed that 49 percent of women in the study smoked prior to their diagnosis. Following treatment only 9 percent continued the habit.

“We would of course like the number to be zero, but the decrease in smoking among these women was significant and a very positive thing,” said Mumby.

Initially the benefit-finding process can be difficult as patients work through their anxiety, try to adjust to all the changes and cope with the idea that their lives will never be the same. Over time they begin to see that good has come out the difficult journey. Many find that they have a healthier perspective on relationships. Some have significant life, career or education changes.

Silvia Durkin, a Schaumburg resident, wife and mother of two, was the picture in the dictionary of self-sacrifice. She was always thinking of others, sometimes to the detriment of herself. When a lump in her breast turned out to be cancer her life was turned inside out.

“When I found out I had cancer it was like an explosion that shook me to the core. I didn’t know where to go or what do. I like to be in control, but

when the diagnosis was cancer I thought I had lost control of my own body and that was really difficult,” said Durkin. “But it was what I needed to get me out of my ingrained habits. Though I’d always been active and a healthy eater I started to break out of my old habits and learn more about different types of exercise and eating a variety of foods. When I met with Dr. Mumby she encouraged me to start doing something for myself.”

That something was Pilates and yoga classes. Durkin found she really enjoyed them and was a star pupil. Now, cancer free, Silvia has become a Pilates instructor at the studio at the request of the owner.

“I would never have even considered taking classes let alone being an instructor before I had cancer. We get so boxed into our lives that it sometimes takes a kick in the butt to get us out,” said Durkin.

She’s also found that it has encouraged her to help others in a healthier way and that she hopes her experience will give someone else facing a similar situation hope.

“This really made me reach into myself and take a look at the big picture. Good things and bad things happen and we need to find positives in every bump in the road,” said Durkin.

“People need time to process their experience. Benefit-finding helps people contemplate and reflect over the whole experience and put things into perspective: this is where I was and this is where I am now,” said Mumby.

This is especially true for cancer survivors like Durkin.

“The transition into long-term cancer survivor has received little attention, but with 12 million [cancer survivors](#) and the number

continuing to grow these issues will become more and more important,” said Mumby. “Having had cancer will always be a part of their lives, but the question is where do they go from here? Benefit-finding helps them look at the experience and to see how far they’ve come and to take pride in that. It also shows them life is still out there and there is more for them to do.”

Provided by Loyola University

Citation: Cancer: A Silver Lining? (2009, June 22) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-06-cancer-silver-lining.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.