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Wholeistic Healing and Cancer

Cory Driesenga

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HNR

Prof. Toot

Cancer is a disease that nearly everyone has experience with. Almost everyone has a relative or a friend that has had cancer. It is a disease that has no targeted cure, vaccine, and can not be prevented. Even if a person recovers after chemotherapy, there is still a chance of a recrudescence down the road. There are over 200 known types of cancer that cause disease in humans. In 2012 there were 1,638,910 estimated new cases of cancer in the US alone. According to the same estimate there were 577,190 estimated deaths due to cancer. Because cancer is so prevalent, the methods for treatment of cancer are of the utmost importance. Unfortunately many hospitals focus on healing the disease only, rather than considering the patient as a whole. They prescribe curative treatments only; while this is good most cancer patients need more than just chemotherapy. Many cancer patients need additional support. Patients need to be informed of exactly what is happening and who they can get into contact with for any help they need. This is the idea of wholistic medicine. Herbert A. Otto and James W. Knight provide an excellent definition of wholistic healing,

Wholistic healing is the treatment of the whole person. It helps bring the mental/emotional, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of the person's being in greater harmony and employs wholistic principles and the elements of a total, integrated treatment program, with emphasis on any therapy or treatment that stimulates a person's own healing process.

This definition provides the four major areas that need to be addressed when caring for patients. It also highlights the fact that alternative therapies should be considered if they help stimulate the patient's healing. Wholistic principles are also mentioned. All together there are eight basic principles and concepts that underlie the wholistic philosophy.

1. Recognition that every human being has vast untapped potentials, resources, and powers.
2. The fostering of self-awareness and self-understanding can play a vital role in the healing process.
3. Placing reliance on the capacities and resources of the person seeking health is a key factor in mobilizing the healing process.
4. The interpersonal relationship environment is an integral part of the treatment program and is of outstanding importance throughout the period of healing.
5. Maximal use needs to be made of self-regulating processes and therapies within the dynamics of a disease process before that process reaches the point where major chemotherapy or surgical treatment is required.
6. Wholistic healing makes optimum use of the dynamic and therapeutic forces inherent in group interaction and group work.
7. Recognizing the integrative aspect of life.
8. Utilization of a person's spriritual resources or belief structure is an important aspect of the wholistic healing process.

The first concept, "Recognition that every human being has vast untapped potentials, resources, and powers" is talking about our lack of understanding of our own bodies' capabilities. Although great strides have been made in understanding the systems of the human body, we still know very little of its true capabilities. One of the most well known facts that demonstrate this principle is that humans use only 10 percent of our brains. This is a prime example of our bodies not utilizing their full capabilities. Similarly when a body is injured we know how the different systems compensate to help repair the body, but we do not fully understand what the body can do in times of crisis.

The second concept, "The fostering of self-awareness and self-understanding can play a vital role in the healing process" speaks to the fact that when in times of crisis humans realize truths about themselves. In the case of cancer, if a person is a smoker and they get lung cancer they almost certainly will realize that smoking is not good for their health and thus will stop smoking. This is a positive lifestyle change that will contribute to their health in the long run, as well as have a positive effect on overcoming the current disease. It is very important that the physician who works with the patient strives to facilitate this personal growth during the patient's healing process.

The third concept is, "Placing reliance on the capacities and resources of the person seeking health is a key factor in mobilizing the healing process." This concept refers to the fact that the sick person is the one primarily responsible for his/her own recovery. The physician that the patient sees facilitates the healing process in the patient. This also points out that the patient if possible should be

actively involved in the deciding the best course of treatment. By doing this the physician also respects the patient's autonomy. Including the patient in the decision making process will also motivate the patient to stick to the treatment plan, as they had a hand in crafting it.

The fourth concept is, "The interpersonal relationship environment is an integral part of the treatment program and is of outstanding importance throughout the period of healing." This encompasses the fact that humans are inherently social creatures, and they benefit greatly from having a circle of people support them during their time of need. It not only removes stress from their situation, but it can motivate the patient to fight harder through the disease. This concept also covers the relationship with the physician and nursing staff. If the patient has a good relationship with the doctor, they can work better together. The patient is also more likely to ask questions or provide input when deciding on treatment. Even having short chats with the nurses can lead to reduced stress in the patient and make the patient feel more comfortable in the hospital. All of these outcomes enhance the patients healing process, and can help them recover quicker.

The fifth concept is. "Maximal use needs to be made of self-regulating processes and therapies within the dynamics of a disease process before that process reaches the point where major chemotherapy or surgical treatment is required." This concept is about what the patient can do to speed their own healing process. This can include meditating, relaxing, or any other practice that helps stimulate the patient's body to heal. For example before a cancer patient

goes in for chemotherapy, spending some time meditating beforehand can help lower the patients stress levels. In some other diseases this can actually heal the patient without further treatment.

The sixth concept is, Wholistic healing makes optimum use of the dynamic and therapeutic forces inherent in group interaction and group work. This concept points out that group sessions can provide a large positive effect on patients. Having the ability to speak with others in similar situations to their own can help patients realize their situation is not hopeless. It can motivate the patient to continue treatment, thus increasing the odds of their recovery. Group sessions can also plug patients in to other support programs that others in the group are involved in. This will provide further support and take more of the burden off of the patients loved ones. Having others to talk to, who also understand how difficult cancer can be, can help cancer patient's deal with their own emotions concerning their disease as well. Through these groups patients would also likely form friendships. Not only will these friendships help them overcome their current cancer, but if it should ever return down the road they will already have a support network in place.

The seventh concept is, "Recognizing the integrative aspect of life." Healing the disease is the main goal of wholistic healing, but it also strives to better the patients life after the disease has been conquered. For example lack of exercise, bad nutrition, and any other factor like smoking that can contribute to cancer should be corrected. Wholistic healing recognizes that educating a person on the risk factors for cancer and helping them to minimize their risk factors will

help the patient stay healthy in the long term. This concept also covers the social aspect of having cancer. If there is any dysfunction in the patient's family or other relationships, this can contribute to the progression of the cancer. Resolving these problems will help in many ways. First it will remove a source of stress from the patient's life. Second it will provide the patient with further support in their effort to combat cancer.

Finally the eighth concept is, "Utilization of a person's spiritual resources or belief structure is an important aspect of the wholistic healing process." Many physicians do not believe that faith can be useful during the healing process, this however is not true. Faith can provide a cancer patient access to a whole support structure from the church or religious events that they attend. Faith can provide a measure of peace to those with cancer, thus allowing them to heal more effectively. Furthermore faith in and of itself can be useful in healing. There is such a thing as miracles. Another more pragmatic view of faith as a healing tool would be that it can be used like suggestion. A physician or other patients could encourage the patient through their faith, thus providing the patient a boost in moral. This could even go so far as to provide the placebo effect. That is what a person mentally believes can cause them to perceive what is differently. Either way the spiritual resources of the patient are a power force that can be utilized to help them heal more effectively.

These eight concepts are taken into account when designing a treatment plan with a patient. The first question when designing a healing plan in conjunction with the patient is who should be on the team that deliberates the

plan? Obviously the physician will be included, but who else is necessary? The next most logical choice is the patient him/herself. Respecting the patient's autonomy it is extremely important that they be included in any discussions about their treatment. The patient also makes the final decision on the course of treatment. It is also wise to include a spiritual advisor for whatever religion the patient subscribes to. This could be either the minister of their church, or maybe their small group leader. Anyone who shares their faith that can support them through their faith during their healing process will be beneficial to the healing process. Having a family member, or close friend to the patient on the team is beneficial as well. The friend can give the patient the courage to ask questions or express opinions that they may not without the moral support. It also helps the patient feel like they have someone in their corner, someone who understands them not just as a patient, but as a person. Depending on how severe the patient's disease is, it is often wise to have a lawyer on the team as well. The lawyer can advise the patient in any legal matters or problems that come up. Finally having a specialist in the disease that the patient has is desirable as well. This way the patient receives confirmation of what the best healing path for their case is. Alternatively if the doctors do not agree the patient has two opinions from which to choose. Either way the patient benefits from having at least two doctors on the healing team. Once the team has been assembled it is important to decide how the team will function, and how often they will meet. Again this depends on how far the cancer has progressed in the patient, and what type of cancer it is. Typically the patient and the doctor will meet more than the whole team for

checkups and treatments that were decided upon. Then when the group meets they can examine results and make further decisions from there. As to how the healing team sessions are run, democratic practices seem to work best. By that I mean rotating leadership roles, and allowing every to speak their mind about any topic. This works best when every team member respects all the others and values their opinions. This approach also distributes the power, so no one member has more influence on the decision made than any other.

One of the great things about a wholeistic healing model is that every patient gets a customized treatment plan. What works well for one cancer patient, will have little effect on another. Once the team is assembled what types of treatments should be considered? Essentially any treatment that will help the patient should be considered. This means that anything that will help support the patient physically, mentally/emotionally, spiritually, or socially. People are all different. Some will need more emotional support during their battle with cancer, while others will need help socially. It is also important when considering treatments that not only “accepted” treatments are considered. Alternative medicine has proven effective in some cases. Practices such as acupuncture have proven beneficial some patient’s healing process. It is necessary for the team to listen to the patient and discover where the patient needs support during their fight. Although many doctors do not take all four areas into account, each is very important and provides benefits in the healing process if considered.

Doctors care for the patients' body. Physically our current system of care does very well for the patients. Doctors in the modern era have many choice of what treatment to prescribe for patients. They have the option of surgery to remove the tumor if it is operable. They could prescribe a cocktail of chemotherapy trying to poison the cancer. They could use targeted radiation to kill the cancer. All of these treatments are effective on for the patient physically, but if this is as far as the treatment goes doctors have failed to treat the whole person. The patients are more than just a body. Doctors should also consider the patients emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Most doctors can understand the emotional and social needs, but very few put any stock in spiritual having any use in medicine.

Many doctors underestimate the effect that the spiritual aspect can have on a patient's treatment. Apart from any miraculous healings through spirituality, being a devoted follower of some faith has large advantages. Because many religions encourage a healthier lifestyle, a patient who follows a faith will likely live a healthy lifestyle. This decreases the chance they get sick in the first place. If they get sick it allows the patient's body to respond to the cancer more effectively. Studies have been done that show people who attend religious services have lower rates of alcohol consumption and smoking. This gives patients who attend religious services a clear advantage in the fight against cancer. Another important factor when considering cancer is how early the cancer is detected. The earlier the cancer is detected the more likely it is to be treated successfully. Studies have been done that found women who regularly

attend religious services had a greater rate of using pap smears, as well as increased mammography screening. Religious patients that survive their cancer are also more likely to make better life decisions afterwards as well. All of these results point to the benefit of addressing faith in the treatment plan for patients.

Being diagnosed with cancer is an enormous shock. In the minds of most people, a diagnosis of cancer is a death sentence. Often they believe that death will be slow and sometimes even painful. Nearly all patients go through the five stages of grief. It is important that the team provide mental support for the patient to help them work through their issues. If the mentality of the patient is not addressed, they may become stuck in the denial or any other stage. Many patients will try to avoid the issue during the denial stage. They will not want to talk about or gain any more information on their cancer. This is almost the worst thing the patient could do. As more time passes more and more cancer cells are being created inside of them. The best course of action is to address the problem head on with open eyes. In order to face the reality of their cancer, many patients need extra support. Then they will not be able to participate in the healing process with the rest of the team, and the likelihood of successfully overcoming the cancer decrease. It is very important that at least some members of the team are aware of the patient's mental state. That way if they relapse back to an earlier stage the team member can move in to support the patient and help them get back on track. A patient finding out they have cancer is devastating not only mentally, but socially as well.

Humans are social creatures. As such they rely on those around them to support them when going through hard times. Being diagnosed with cancer is about as hard as it gets, therefore the social support system is very important. Studies have found that people with many relationships live longer and have better physical health than those with fewer friends. The prime benefit patients with cancer can gather from friends is emotional support. Patients with people around them who can help them come to terms with the disease, and confront it are far better off than those without these ties. Social support also helps to fend off psychological disorders such as depression or even post traumatic stress. Having a friend around to discuss the cancer can help patients clarify what treatment they want for their cancer. It can also get the patient thinking about alternative or supporting treatments they feel would help them heal. Then when the healing team meets they have some idea about what would work best for them.

Unfortunately not every fight with cancer ends in victory. At some point it is the responsibility of the healing team to decide when there is no more hope for recovery. Largely this decision lies on the patient and the doctor. The doctor can provide a medical opinion on the patient's chances, but the patient makes the final decision on when to switch from curative care, to supportive care. Curative care is just like it sounds, working with the patient with the goal of complete recovery. In the case of cancer, treatments include chemotherapy, surgery to remove tumors, or medicines to slow the cancers growth. It also includes diagnostic tests like MRIs, CAT scans, and any other test that allows doctors to

visualize or determine the extent of the cancer. When the call is made and treatment switches from curative to supportive care the patient is no longer subjected to invasive diagnostic tests or any therapies that cause unpleasant side effects. Instead treatment switches to therapies that make the patient feel better. Any medication that can help control pain or any negative effects that the cancer is causing the patient will be used to allow the patient good quality of life. It is important that the team focus on allowing the patient to live out their final days in comfort, living their life as best they can under the circumstances.

The wholeistic model of medicine is usually applied to patients with mental disorders, but it can also be used with cancer patients. A treatment plan that follows the eight concepts of wholeistic medicine can help patients to overcome their cancer. Typically doctors address patients' physical needs when treating cancer, but often fail to consider the mental/emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of the patient. When all four aspects of the patients' treatment are considered, having cancer for the patient is not such a traumatic experience and it also raises the chances that they will recover and stay healthy in the future.

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