Patient Handout: Healing Hopes

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Dear Patient,

What you hope for matters. This handout is designed to encourage you to focus on healing hopes—namely, specific hopes that help you get good care and live as fully as possible.

What is hope?

Hope is a pleasant feeling linked to your belief that the desired outcome can happen. It’s a feeling that arises only in settings of uncertainty about something that matters. You don’t hope the sun will rise, because that’s as certain as anything gets. You do hope treatments go smoothly and the cancer goes away (or stays away).

How can hope help in settings of uncertainty?

Hope is a pleasant feeling that offsets the unpleasant feelings of survivorship. Like honey added to a bitter mix, hope takes the edge off fear, sadness, anger, and sense of powerlessness. This helps you wait when you can’t do anything about the outcome. For example, your hope for relief helps you find patience and grit while you wait to see if medication or physical healing will bring relief.

Perhaps the most important way hope helps is by motivating you to action that increases the chance of the desired outcome. Hope for recovery motivates you to return to the clinic for your next treatment. Hope for resilience motivates you to attend a support group, read books on survivorship, and/or work with a counselor.

Can hope cure cancer?

No. If hope could cure cancer, everyone would be cured. The body’s self-healing potential is limited. Even if research could prove hope puts the body in a healing mode, hope has a limited role in directly healing you from cancer.

Can hope ever hurt you?

Yes. Hope can harm you if it keeps you from getting good care. If “hope to avoid toxic treatment” leads you to delay effective chemotherapy or take worthless potions instead of seeing an oncologist, that hope is dangerous—it’s keeping you from treatment that can help. If “hope it’s a false alarm” leads you to keep a worrisome symptom secret from everyone, that hope is harmful. [Note: That same “hope it’s a false alarm” is a healing hope if it calms you while you report the symptom to your doctors and undergo tests.]

Which hopes are healing?

Everyone is different. You must discover which specific hopes are healing for you. These tips can help:

Invest in realistic hopes. Realistic hopes are based on accurate information about the chance of achieving the desired outcome. We will help you obtain sound information about your illness and recovery. We will review the usual outcome for patients in your situation, as well as the best possible outcome.

Focus on short-term hopes. While holding on to long-term goals that inspire you, try focusing on short-term goals. Doing so increases how often you’ll experience the emotional lift of fulfilled hopes. Those little lifts may increase your general state of hopefulness. Should a short-term hope not come to fruition, your disappointment may be less than if you’d been hoping a long time.

Focus on hope that offers you a role to play today. A focus on hopes that motivate you to proper action may help you regain a sense of control. Each proper action you take increases the chance of the desired outcome. That gives you another reason to feel hopeful for that outcome, which may increase your general state of hopefulness.

If you can’t do anything to increase the chance of the desired outcome, hope still can motivate you to healing actions. Hope for more courage, patience, fortitude, and serenity can motivate you to learn how to nurture those virtues. Hope for happiness can motivate you to seek out and create joyful moments in tough times.

Which hopes might be most healing while undergoing medical evaluations?

People naturally hope for “good news.” For many patients, hope for “accurate news” is more helpful. Why? Hope for accurate news decreases stress by giving them a sense of purpose during scans (i.e., hold still) and helping them feel more prepared for any news. This is one example of an important concept: In some situations, the most healing hope may not be for the outcome you want the most, but the outcome that will help you the most.

What if you’re having trouble feeling hope?

Hope may be elusive if the chemistry of your brain has been affected by medications, sleep deprivation, pain, fatigue, poor nutrition, chronic stress, or your cancer. Together, we can address medical issues that may be impairing your quality of life and making it difficult to feel hopeful. We can discuss options for your medications and therapies, with a goal of improving your brain chemistry without hurting your chance for recovery.

What if people disapprove of what you are hoping for?

A specific hope that helps you may not work well for other patients in similar situations or for your loved ones. That’s fine. If a hope motivates you to proper action and/or helps you wait, that hope is a healing hope for you.

What now?

Share your big and little hopes with us. Doing so helps us know you better and enables us to do all we can to help you realize your hopes whenever possible. Together, we can ensure each hope is realistic by reviewing the facts and beliefs on which that hope is based. If you feel afraid to hope for an outcome that you want and that is possible, we can address that fear so you can benefit from that hope.

Periodically, reflect on your hopes. Ask yourself, “Is this hope helping me?” In the setting of uncertainty, healing hopes help you get good care and live as fully as possible today, tomorrow, and every day.

As a survivor, my life changed for the better after I began focusing my attention on healing hopes—specific hopes that help me get good care and live as fully as possible (See “Healing Hope”; May 25, 2017). This patient handout offers a practical approach to hope.