

Impact of Positive Emotion on Survival

Paul E. McGhee, PhD, www.LaughterRemedy.com

"The simple truth is that happy people generally don't get sick." (Bernie Siegel, MD)

"Laughter in and of itself cannot cure cancer nor prevent cancer, but laughter as part of the full range of positive emotions including hope, love, faith, strong will to live, determination and purpose, can be a significant and indispensable aspect of the total fight for recovery." (Harold H. Benjamin, PhD)

In the previous article, we discussed research which suggests that one's emotional state influences the body's biochemistry in a manner that can either promote good health, or interfere with it. But is there any evidence that emotions can actually have an impact on survival? Can a persistent positive or negative frame of mind influence whether you live or die in a battle against cancer or other diseases? If so, this provides all the motivation you need to begin making an effort to develop humor (and other) skills which help you manage your mood on a day-to-day basis.

Several studies have shown that a positive attitude or emotional state can boost your chances of surviving cancer. In one study, among patients with metastatic (spreading) cancers, those who expressed greater hope at the time of their diagnosis survived longer.¹ In another study, over 400 reports of spontaneous remission of cancer were reviewed and analyzed. The patients themselves attributed their cure to a broad range of causes, but only one factor was common to all the cases—a shift toward greater hope and a positive attitude.²

One clinician traced unexpected tumor shrinkage to favorable changes in the psychosocial situation of the patient. Examples of such changes include "a sudden fortunate marriage; the experience of having one's entire order of clergy engage in an intercessory prayer; sudden, lasting reconciliation with a long-hated mother; unexpected and enthusiastic praise and encouragement from an expert in one's field; and the fortunate death of a decompensated alcoholic and addicted husband who stood in the way of a satisfying career."³

The late Norman Cousins described a national survey of oncologists (completed during his stay at the UCLA Medical School) in his last book, *Head First: The Biology of Hope*. Of the 649 who offered their opinions on the importance of various psychological factors in fighting cancer, "More than 90% of the physicians said they attached the highest value to the attitudes of hope and optimism."

All of this research is consistent with the findings of a study showing that method actors asked to generate the emotion of joy within themselves showed an increase in the number of natural killer cells circulating in the blood stream within 20 minutes.⁴ (Remember, a

key role of natural killer cells is to seek out and destroy tumor cells throughout your body.) Once they got themselves out of this positive state, their levels of natural killer cells quickly dropped again.

Joy, of course, is the emotion we experience during humor and laughter. So these findings are also consistent with the findings discussed elsewhere at this website showing that watching a humorous video increases the number of, and activity of, natural killer cells.

There have always been doctors who have emphasized the importance of a "will to live" in fighting serious diseases. Most recently, this banner has been carried nobly by Dr. Bernie Siegel. He emphasizes the importance of hope, determination, optimism and a "fighting spirit" among patients who are battling cancer.

Evidence of the importance of a fighting spirit was obtained in another study of cancer survivors. Cancer patients with a fighting spirit were most likely to be long-term survivors and have no relapses. Short-term survivors were more likely to show a "stoic, stiff upper lip attitude" and to continue their lives either as if nothing were different, or with a sense of helplessness or hopelessness.⁵

The question, of course, is how do you go about generating or sustaining hope, optimism, determination and a fighting spirit if these are not qualities you've shown throughout your life. Love and your own faith/spirituality are important sources of this hopeful and optimistic attitude. Another source is your sense of humor. It is no coincidence that so many cancer survivors credit their sense of humor for getting them through their ordeal. Humor helps overcome and work through the trials of each day, and when you find a way to laugh in the midst of your problems, you automatically shift toward a frame of mind that invites a hopeful outlook and a conviction that you can beat this disease.

So make it your goal to learn to find something to laugh at every day, and to take yourself a little less seriously, as you continue to take your illness and your treatments very seriously.

[Adapted from Dr. McGhee's book, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*.]

References

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⁴ Kemeny, M. (1993). Emotions and the immune system. In B. Moyers, *Healing and the Mind*. New York.

⁵ Pettingale, K.W., et al. (1985). Mental attitudes to cancer: An attitudinal prognostic factor. *Lancet*. 1985, 8.