

- Cancer awareness

How mindfulness and meditation can help fight cancer

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In the September issue of H&L (Health and Lifestyle) magazine, Dr. Buenaventura Ramos Jr., a respected oncologist (cancer specialist), wrote about the benefits of mindfulness in cancer patients.



Mindfulness consists of relaxing meditative practices that focus on present-moment awareness. Dr. Ramos finds it an effective complementary approach to established medical and surgical treatments of patients with cancers.

Other doctors find it useful in different types of ailments, especially stress-aggravated medical problems.

Dr. Ramos explains that mindfulness helps cancer patients put things in proper perspective so they are able to control their temper, manage the trauma of undergoing aggressive treatment which may include radical surgery and potent anticancer chemotherapy, and still enjoy a good quality of life despite the circumstances.

“Life after a cancer diagnosis is filled with questions and challenging situations in every phase of the entire cancer experience. These can produce a lot of stress, which, in turn, can affect the quality of one’s life,” wrote Dr. Ramos.

Relieving stress on cancer patients can go a long way in improving their long-term outlook. Stress is considered a factor in the development and progression of some cancers, so addressing all problems in the cancer patient contributing to stress may have a favorable impact on the course of the disease.

Change in self-image

Dr. Ramos also reminded healthcare givers of cancer patients that, independent of the expected outcome of the cancer, the diagnosis brings with it a change in a person’s self-image and in his or her role in the home and workplace.

“One consequence of the disease is that the patient feels betrayed by his or her body,” said Dr. Ramos. “The cancer patient feels that he or she, and not just a body part, is diseased.”

The patient then undergoes a roller-coaster of physical and emotional states in the different stages of a cancer experience— from learning of the diagnosis from a physician, deciding on treatment, completing a treatment and recovering functional capacity, to adapting to the so-called “new normal,” and living in eternal vigilance for signs of its return. It’s like having the sword of Damocles hanging constantly over one’s head.

This is where a mindfulness-based cancer recovery (MBCR) program is most useful. It is characterized by the clinical application of meditative practices to help patients develop a particular form of awareness, known as mindfulness. It is defined as present-moment nonjudgmental awareness. This eliminates fretting over events of the past, or blaming oneself or one's family for causing the circumstances or risk factors leading to cancer.

It also reduces over-analyzing and judging current experience, worrying about the future or, worse, losing hope.

“We need to address the unpleasant feelings of guilt from a past lifestyle, fear about the uncertainty of the future or imagined negative outcome, and uncomfortable present moment experience because of resistance to it, rather than accepting it,” explained Dr. Ramos.

Patients are taught simple mindfulness meditations, which may be done for a few minutes several times a day. In between, they're encouraged to go about their normal lives, constantly reminding themselves to focus on the present, “the here and now.”

“Being in this present moment, letting go and practicing non-attachment and acceptance are so helpful in dealing with the uncertainty and fear that are commonly associated with the cancer experience,” wrote Dr. Ramos.

Boosting immune function

In the eight-week mindfulness program, the patients learn to calm feelings of fear, uncertainty and lack of control. How does this translate to actual health benefits?

Dr. Ramos explained: “They (the patients) mindfully manage difficult symptoms and treatment side effects. They boost their immune function through meditation and healing yoga, which are the main techniques used by this program. Then they eventually discover their own capacity for healing and thriving after adversity.”

Mindfulness meditation is currently considered complementary therapy to conventional or mainstream medicine.

“Medical education, in general, focused so much on the body that, somehow, the other aspects of a human being—the mind and the spirit—were left out in the management. And yet, a whole person is composed of these three aspects, mind, body and spirit. Thus for medicine to be holistic, it must involve management of all these,” said Dr. Ramos.

This is supported by randomized controlled trials and scientific researches showing usefulness in alleviating the emotional stress associated with cancer and various types of illnesses—general distress, insomnia, depression and other psychosomatic symptoms.

“The effectiveness of MBCR stems from its focus on the whole person and not just the cancer diagnosis,” said Dr. Ramos. “The program provides us with the tools that we can use to train our minds in such a way that we become more deeply involved with life as it unfolds, moment by moment.”

I have always believed in meditation as one of the healthy practices one can do on a daily basis. For me, praying is a form of meditation, and we can combine both meditation and praying in one session.

When we're still, we can commune with our God, who has always assured us that we never need worry about anything in this world, and should just enjoy “life as it unfolds, moment by

moment.” It has been my stress reliever for the longest time, and no unbeliever can ever convince me otherwise.