A Positive Attitude And Cancer Survival

Dr. Bruce Campbell, M.D.

“God helps those who help themselves.”
-Something that sounds like Truth but fortunately isn’t mentioned in any religious text

“I’m gonna beat this thing again, Doc! I just know it!”

Over the course of several years, I helped care for a man with a very rare cancer that recurred over-and-over. With each new tumor, he became more focused on beating the disease and despite the repeated setbacks, he remained eternally positive. He spent hours researching every available experimental treatment. He trekked from center to center for therapy. His determination was inspirational. Despite the intensity of his effort, he eventually lost his battle and died. His well-attended visitation and funeral were testimonies to his remarkable life, his outgoing personality and the respect everyone had for his determination.

My super-positive patient told me more than once that his attitude was helpful. “It’s why I’m still alive,” he said. His intensity prompted me to ask: How does attitude affect survival? If a patient tries “hard enough,” can cancer be controlled?

It’s a difficult issue. It is wonderful being with people who are optimistic. As a physician, patients who are positive in the face of terrible adversity are inspirational. Of course, many patients dealing with cancer are devastated both physically and emotionally. With the tobacco-related cancers for which I care, many of my patients carry an extra burden of guilt.

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center Psychiatrist Jimmie Holland, MD works with many patients who carry this burden. He refers to a patient or family’s insistence that he or she maintain a positive attitude at all times as “The Tyranny of Positive Thinking.”

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