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A New View, After Diagnosis

Experimental Group Therapy Aims to Help Cancer Patients Find Meaning in Face of Mortality

By MELINDA BECK

When Midge Wilker was diagnosed with advanced colon cancer last summer, she couldn't make it through a doctor's appointment without sobbing. A former IBM executive who founded her own management-training company, she was weak from chemotherapy and terrified; the cancer had spread into her ovaries and lymph nodes and possibly her liver. She didn't raise her window blinds for weeks. "Everybody said how important it is to have a positive attitude," says Ms. Wilker, 64 years old. "But I'm not Lance Armstrong. I wanted to jump in the grave."

While getting chemo one day at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, Ms. Wilker agreed to join a study comparing two different forms of group therapy. Asked what she hoped to gain from it, she said: "I need to find the courage to face this."

The unusual [program](#) she was randomly assigned to aims to help cancer patients find a sense of meaning, peace and purpose in their lives, even as the end approaches. "For many cancer patients, the biggest challenge is, 'How do I live in the space between my diagnosis and my eventual death?'" says William Breitbart, a Memorial Sloan-Kettering psychiatrist who developed the program, known as meaning-centered psychotherapy, and has tested it with more than 300 patients since 2000.

Helping Cancer Patients Find Meaning in Life

Dr. Breitbart based his program in part on the writings of Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz with the conviction that people can endure any suffering if they know their life has meaning. The eight-week program helps patients with Stage 3 or 4 cancer reconnect with the many sources of meaning in life—love, work, history, family relationships—and teaches them that when cancer produces an obstacle in one, they can find meaning in another.

"We help cancer patients understand that they are not dead yet," says Dr. Breitbart. "The months or years of life that remain can be times of extraordinary growth."

In fact, anyone can benefit from reflecting on what's most meaningful in life, he says. "Every human being wrestles with the question: How can you live knowing that you're going to die? "Most of us are too distracted to think about it. But ask yourself, 'What accomplishments are you most proud of? What do you want your legacy to be?' It's never too late," he says.

Most major cancer centers today offer support groups and individual counseling for patients. The field of "psycho-oncology"—which addresses the psychological, spiritual and emotional aspects of cancer—is booming around the world. Memorial Sloan-Kettering's meaning-centered psychotherapy is still in the research phase. Early results are encouraging. In a pilot study of 90 patients presented at the International Psycho-Oncology Society in Vienna last month, Dr. Breitbart and colleagues reported that meaning-centered group therapy significantly boosted patients' spiritual well-being and reduced their anxiety and desire for death compared with traditional support groups that typically discuss issues like dealing with doctors and body image.

The idea is already beginning to spread. Five hospitals in Italy are replicating Dr. Breitbart's group-therapy study. Hospitals in Denmark, Germany and Argentina are embarking on similar programs. Researchers in Canada have adapted meaning-centered therapy to help hospice nurses avoid burnout, and created a single session program for terminally ill patients.

Ms. Wilker was too sick from chemotherapy last September to attend the first session, which introduced the group members to each other and to Frankl's book, "Man's Search for Meaning," about his years in Nazi concentration camps.

The second session focused on identity "BC and AD"—before cancer and after diagnosis. Ms. Wilker came in sweat clothes, with no makeup, unsure that she would return. "In a very thoughtful way, they made us think about our past and what cancer had taken away from us," she recalls. "For me, it was everything. I was morphing into somebody I didn't recognize."

Most of the other patients in her group had been diagnosed with cancer years before and were facing its return. They talked about loving the theater or cycling and finding ways they could still enjoy them. "I thought, 'I am looking at such courage here. I've got to pull myself together,'" Ms. Wilker says.

Sessions three and four focus on historical sources of meaning. Group members were asked to reflect on their families, the eras they grew up in—even the origins of their names.

Some of the women said they hadn't gotten enough love when they were children, so they had worked hard to make their children feel loved.

"I was the youngest of six and had a glorious childhood" on New York's Long Island, Ms. Wilker says. "My father would take me to church and we'd always stop at the bakery for anything I wanted, and enough for my friends. ... And my mother was the greatest advocate you could ever want. But if you were faced with a problems, she'd want you to figure it out."

Ms. Wilker also remembered times when she had been brave. She bucked IBM convention to give a newly promoted subordinate a top rating. Earlier in her career, she confronted the commander of a military base where she was working to demand a promotion, and got it. "If what you are looking for is courage, it helps to recognize that you've done some courageous things in the past," she says.

Session five focuses on encountering life's limitations, and Frankl's message that even when everything else has been stripped away, people can still choose their attitude toward a situation and the meaning they take from it. Discussion questions include: what would be a meaningful death?

Ms. Wilker shares notes from her cancer-support program, which has helped her find meaning in everyday life and given her a reason to continue.

"By now, all the cards were out on the table. You had to be honest with yourself and think, 'what could live on beyond yourself?'" Ms. Wilker recalls. "For me, it's letting everyone know to get a colonoscopy."

"We tread lightly here; this is not supposed to be a scary session," says Shannon Poppito, clinical psychologist who led many of the sessions. She says that what troubles many cancer patients most is not the fear of death, but unresolved issues from the past. It's never too late to resolve them, says Dr. Breitbart, who notes that in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," the main character becomes the person he wants to be in the last five minutes of his life.

The next two sessions focus on ways to transcend the limits imposed by cancer. "You are not dying of cancer—you are living with cancer until you pass. You can make it meaningful, even if all you can do is lie in bed," says

Dr. Poppito. Sometimes patients lament that they've always wanted to paint or write and will never have a chance. "You can find creative ways to realize the essence of those dreams," she says. "You can be a writer by writing letters to your children."

And simply experiencing life can be meaningful. For session seven, patients are asked to list things they love or find beautiful. Ms. Wilker talked about her husband and her 28 nieces and nephews and 62 grandnieces and grandnephews. She also talked about the view from her apartment that she was enjoying again and the Greek statue of Winged Victory that she had seen in her 20s in the Louvre.

"I realized that I didn't have to work so hard to find the meaning of life," she says. "It was being handed to me everywhere I looked."

In the final session, group members present a "legacy project" that symbolizes the meaning they've found and want to pass on. One woman who loved New York City started writing a book about its sights and sound, Dr. Poppito recalls. Another who had always wanted to see Italy finally bought plane tickets. And a man who had alcoholic, abusive parents had recalled watching his father make woodcuttings—one of the few times they bonded. For his legacy project, he carved a woodcut of a Celtic Trinity intertwined with a heart. "He said, 'This is what I will teach my children—that there is eternal love and that I will be there for them, far beyond my passing,'" says Dr. Poppito.

In Ms. Wilker's group, a woman brought in a family recipe. Her identity involved carrying on family traditions had despaired because she could no longer use her arm to cook. She realized that her daughter could help and learn the traditions too.

Ms. Wilker decided that her project would be "to be the courageous person my family and friends think I am." She arrived dressed up and carrying a replica of the Winged Victory that sits in her living room and a photo from her 50th grade-school reunion that she had found the courage to attend.

"It's amazing to me what a huge change in mind set I've had in a year's time," she says. "I said to my husband recently, 'I know this sounds crazy, but who has it better than us?'" She still has unfinished business. She has an idea she wants to send the CEO of a company. There are books she'd like to write, and she'd like to volunteer at Memorial Sloan-Kettering. As for her cancer, an upcoming CAT scan will reveal how effective the chemotherapy, radiation and surgery have been. "But if it comes back, I know I will fight it," she says.

Many patients who have gone through the program say it gave them new strength to face whatever the future brings.

"It's paradoxical," says Dr. Poppito, who is now in private practice, using meaning-centered therapy to help patients face a variety of life transitions. "You'd think that once people have found this new meaning in life, they wouldn't want to let it go. But knowing their life has meaning and that it will continue beyond them seems to lessen that white-knuckle grip on life and give them a sense of peace."

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Reading on Meaning

- "Man's Search for Meaning," by Viktor Frankl
- "The Will to Meaning" by Viktor Frankl
- "The Courage to Be" by Paul Tillich
- "Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death" by Irvin D. Yalom
- "The Way of Transition" by William Bridges
- "Love and Death" by Forrest Church