Coping Styles and Strategies
MGH Cancer Center Conference for Patients and Families

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What is coping?

At its simplest, coping is a broad term referring to peoples’ responses to stress.

- For people facing cancer – whether patients, caregivers, or loved ones – there are many sources of stress that require response.
  - The constant demand of the situation can be exhausting.
  - It can challenge people in ways they have never experienced.
  - Coping strategies that worked before cancer may no longer be helpful.
  - What helps one person cope could be quite different from what helps their partner, caregiver, children, etc.
Coping takes many forms…

I have avoided talking to others about my feelings. I have tried to find a silver lining. I have been drinking more. I have surrounded myself with supportive people. I have blamed myself for my situation. I have tried to find personal growth. I have blamed my doctor for what is happening. I have talked to someone about my feelings. I have started to pray more.
Researchers have formulated many ways to characterize the coping styles everyone employs.

- Coping styles can be:
  - Active vs. Avoidant
  - Problem-Focused vs. Emotion-Focused
  - Functional vs. Dysfunctional
  - Useful vs. Less Useful

- Coping styles are not inherently right or wrong. Some are certainly more helpful than others, though.

- People tend to employ multiple coping styles concurrently.
A multitude of coping strategies exists, including, but not limited to:

- Positive thoughts
- Seeking social support
- Blaming others
- Problem solving
- Planning
- Religiosity/faith
- Wishful thinking
- Emotional repression
- Resignation
- Self-blame
- Escape
- Emotional expression
- Denial
- Counting advantages
Coping takes many forms…

I have started to exercise.
I have been sleeping more than usual.
I have pretended this isn’t really happening.
I have found drugs provide a good escape.
I have kept others from knowing about what is happening.
I have gone to my doctor’s appointments.
I have binge-watched my favorite television show.
I have sought out others in a similar situation for support.
I have taken my frustration out on others.
Positive Coping as an Investment

Positive coping is important not only while in treatment, but beyond.

- Receiving a cancer diagnosis and facing treatment inherently affects quality of life and healthy behavior into the future.
- The ongoing/late effects of treatment will require constant adjustments even after treatment has concluded.
- This is not a resolution model. The effects of cancer are not made to disappear with positive coping, but the hope is resilience can be cultivated for the journey.
How do I respond?

Relationships, personal/professional/social roles, and identity can be affected by cancer.

• It is important to know support is available to process these effects...to cope with them.

• Similar to having needed an oncologist, surgeon, or radiation oncologist at different points, some find themselves in need of someone who specializes in the emotional and practical aspects of illness.
  – Mental health providers (social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, among others) employ proven techniques that provide safe space for processing and development of coping skills.
How do I respond?

Individual talk therapy isn’t the only avenue for support.

• Art therapy, music therapy, family counseling, and group therapy are also available options.

• Complementary therapies are a proven outlet for the promotion of positive coping. To name a few:
  – Acupuncture
  – Massage therapy
  – Reiki
  – Yoga

• Peer-to-peer support programs are widely available.
How do I respond?

Everyday opportunities for positive coping exist.

- Listening to music
- Reading
- Walking the dog
- Writing
- Day trips
- Funny cat videos
- Watching television
- Praying
- Watching the sunset
- Dinner with friends
- Going to a movie
- Bicycling
- Taking a walk
- Cleaning/organizing
For many, the support they receive from family and friends will be sufficient.

- Family and friends are the folks who tend to hold the most influence in peoples’ lives and are most accessible on a regular basis.
- Some may never seek support outside their social circle.
Family and Friends

For others, family and friends will not always serve as a source of strength.

- Distance, history, and dynamics sometimes preclude family and friends from being good companions through treatment.

Both of these dynamics are appropriate.

- No one MUST seek professional support.
- At the same time, for some, professionals are a helpful source of support and a great supplement to the social network they have.
Leaning on Others

No one sits down to a piano and knows how to play it right away … No one learns they have cancer and knows how to navigate the experience right away.

- It is normal and completely okay to ask for help.
- No one is expected to carry this alone.
- Positive coping can be learned.
- Growth can be found.
Coping takes many forms…

I have attended a conference where I was able to gather helpful information and learn more about what I, and so many others, am facing.

I have made efforts to develop positive coping strategies.

I have laughed.

I have named my feelings, even if only to myself.

I have tried to live in the present.

I have told myself I am enough and am deserving of good.

I have recognized I am not alone.
Discussion

Questions and answers.

Thank you!


