

Reflections:  
The Power of Practices, Attitudinal Healing, and Overcoming Fear  
By Dwight L. McKee M.D.

For many people, cancer is a word that strikes fear into our hearts and those of our loved ones. In times past, and still to a great extent today, a diagnosis of “inoperable” cancer is considered a death sentence. Of course, the reality is that we are born into life with a death sentence, as we will all leave life through this process we call death. It, along with the meaning of life, are perhaps the greatest mysteries confronting all of us who are alive on this planet. My experience with many, many people facing the challenge of an “incurable” cancer over the past 3 decades has been that it is not so much the fear of death, though that is certainly present to greater and lesser extents in most of us, but the fear of pain, suffering, body changes, loss of control, and loss of dignity that people associate with cancer.

As the attempts of modern medicine become progressively more intense, severe, and destructive, following the military model of a “war on cancer”, people have become progressively more afraid not only of the potential of the disease itself, but of its treatment, in causing great suffering. Over the past 10-15 years, although there have been real breakthroughs for only a few and relatively uncommon types of cancer, there has been great progress toward smaller and gentler surgeries, better control of radiation therapy and hence fewer side effects, development of much better anti-nausea medications, gentler chemotherapies, targeted agents, so that we have progressively less to fear from conventional treatments. Better targeting of those treatments by careful study of each individual tumor’s leading toward greater personalization of cancer therapy is a stated goal of the oncology profession, though they have for the most part passed over the valuable work done by pioneers like Larry Weisenthal, Robert Nagourney, and others who study the response of each person’s live tumor cells to various agents in tissue culture. On the other hand, there is great mainstream interest in studying the gene and protein expression of individual tumors in an effort to individualize therapy, and this field is making progress, though I believe it would move much faster if it incorporated and built on the work of dedicated researchers such as Weisenthal, Nagourney, and others who work in the field of fresh tumor cell culture studies.

Working in the rather eclectic field of Integrative Cancer Therapy since I completed training in conventional medical oncology and hematology 14 years ago, and even in the years from 1975 to 1988 when I worked in the field of alternative/complementary cancer therapies, I have been struck by the observation that often the people I have worked with who have been the most successful in healing from “incurable” cancers, were those who embraced some type of practice, whether meditation, prayer, Tai Chi, Yoga, Qi Gong, or mental imagery, and through such practice were able to achieve a state that I can best describe as “inner peace”. I have come to believe that overcoming fear—the many headed monster created by our collective beliefs about the group of diseases that we call

cancer, is a key step in this journey. It is not a trivial task, and far easier to state or recommend than to accomplish. One of the allies in this quest is confidence, a cousin of faith, whether it be in a physician, an herbalist, a healer, a spiritual teacher, a substance, an approach, a drug, an herb, a supplement program, an institution, a clinical trial, or a spiritual belief. Perhaps the greatest ally is a belief that our essential nature, soul, spirit, or whatever one might call it, survives the body, and is indestructible, that a part of us will be “OK” no matter what. Those who have devoted themselves to pursuits of the mind and logic often have the greatest difficulty in arriving at a deeply held conviction that this is so, simply because it cannot be demonstrated in a tangible way. It is, in the final analysis, an act of faith.

Nevertheless, the physiological consequences of deeply held faith, confidence in healing, be it physical or spiritual, are real, demonstrable, and of great benefit to the physical healing process. Moving from fear to trust, dramatically lowers stress hormones, activates the immune system, improves digestion, overall cellular metabolism, and improves the body’s defenses against disease causing bacteria, viruses, and tumor cells themselves.

Many of the tools of Integrative Cancer Therapy are those related to nurturing and nourishing of the body—foods, juices, nutritional and botanical supplements. Virtually all of these that I recommend in my integrative cancer consultations have science behind them, demonstrating a potential benefit to physiology, and even an ability to modify gene expression of tumor cells in a way that is beneficial to the body carrying them. They also represent hope and possibility; possibility to defy a conventional medical prognosis, perhaps to change a “terminal” illness to a chronic and manageable condition.

It is not uncommon for people, at some point in their journey with cancer and cancer therapy, to become overwhelmed with their supplement and dietary program—either the expense, the volume, the monotony, the “giving up” of “comfort” foods. Sometimes, it is the wisdom of the body, letting them know it would be good to take a break, a “supplement holiday”, or to eat some favorite food the lack of which is making them feel deprived, or perhaps to skip their exercise or meditation. Of course, taking this to an extreme, or persisting in it too long, could be detrimental, but “taking a break” can be very beneficial, allowing a return to the routine with renewed vigor and commitment. For some people it works well to take 1 day a week off from their “program”.

If one notices that they have come to view their therapy, whether conventional, alternative, or integrative, as a punishment, or a burden—that they have come to resent some aspect of their regimen, it should be carefully re-assessed, as such a situation is unlikely to result in healing. This situation is most common when the “program” is being pushed by someone else and that the motivation and desire to pursue it did not come from within the person who is confronting the illness. Often a well meaning, frightened, and/or desperate spouse, child, or parent will push a therapy that they believe in on their loved one, who is following it only to make the other happy, rather than out of their own deep need to recover due to a sense of wanting to further engage life. In my experience such a situation rarely leads to healing, and often ultimately results in conflict and disappointment for both the patient and their well-intentioned caregiver.

One practice that I have found extremely valuable is to use a dietary and supplement program as a vehicle for both visualizing healing, and expressing gratitude. Every time you eat a meal or take supplements, strive to feel a deep sense of gratitude for the plants (and sometimes animals) that have offered themselves to you for nourishment and healing, and for the knowledge and skill of those who have produced and recommended the supplements. I believe that taking a moment to close your eyes and visualize the energy of these substances flowing out into your body to strengthen and heal it, can multiply their physical effects immensely. When using botanical supplements, be aware that a vast array of plant medicines that exist in the natural world are being brought into your body to restore harmony. Restore trust in your body if you have lost it and have confidence in your ability to heal. Follow the path you have set yourself on, keep your mind focused on the present moment and all is possible. Trust your soul to guide you through all the experiences that you need to fully develop in this life.