The Power of the Group

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During my medical training, I knew about support groups and even referred patients to them. But I had never been to one until 1995, when my wife's diagnosis—widely metastatic breast cancer at age 44—left us reeling.

At the first meeting, she told her story. Afterward, she said to me, "I don't know if this is for me." But her oncologist sagely suggested she attend another meeting where she would not be the center of attention. When we did, her comfort level increased.

We attended for four and a half years. With friends, she put up a brave front, acting as normal as possible while raising two children. But friends often disappointed her, either awkwardly dodging the subject of cancer or just disappearing.

There was no such avoidance at the meetings, which she eventually called "my hour and a half of reality each week." The tone could be light and positive when a member went into remission, serious when a new member arrived, heartbroken when one died. One member helped my wife deal with chemotherapy-induced hair loss, for which she remained forever grateful. The group always improved her psychological well-being. My attendance gave me a rare perspective on the group's value that informed my patient care—but not one I have ever shared.

I recently corresponded with the kind, thoughtful psychologist who led the group. She recalled that my wife seldom grieved her own situation but instead offered warm support to others or visited people who weren't doing well.

One interaction stands out. Doris, 27, had inflammatory breast cancer, an often deadly form of the disease. She was a member of the LGBT community, a former Marine who drove a truck. But this strong, resourceful woman was utterly devastated, and her supportive partner was at wits' end. Doris sat on the floor sobbing, quietly but uncontrollably, for the entire meeting. At the end, when everyone else got up to put on their coats, I saw my wife wordlessly walk across the room, cup her hands around Doris's hands, look into her eyes and say, "It's going to be all right." Instantly, Doris's face relaxed. She stopped crying. Her entire demeanor changed. It was unforgettable, a magnanimous measure of support that only someone in my wife's place could have performed.

From that moment on, they were bonded. They would meet for coffee and visit each other if one was in the hospital. Doris opened up to the group, sharing her strength and wonderful humor; when she knew her treatment options were exhausted, she and her partner came to say goodbye. If there was a dry eye in the place, I didn't see it.

About a year after Doris died, my wife passed away. According to the psychologist, nothing hit the group as hard. They even renamed the group in her honor. That was 20 years ago. I thought it was time that I let people know how powerful support groups can be.

For a list of some excellent breast cancer support groups, click here.

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