Words We Need

Healing—the word is related to “wholeness”—isn’t measurable, but it’s nevertheless essential.

June 17, 2019 By Bob Barnett

Can Heal. These words are literally embedded in the title of this magazine, in red letters on the cover. Yet heal is not a word you are likely to hear from medical professionals. And for good reason—it’s hard to define. When we report science, we’ll use terms such as “progression-free survival,” “remission” and that beautiful phrase, “no evidence of disease.”

Precise use of language helps researchers identify real progress in cancer medicine. Of late, that progress has been remarkable. Immunotherapy, which unleashes the immune system against cancer, can lead to cures for once-incurable diagnoses, such as Stage IV melanoma (see “I Don’t Have ‘Quit’ in Me”). Yet immunotherapy often fails, and researchers are working to find out why. Clues to improving its effectiveness may be found in the gut microbiome, the ecosystem of bacteria and other microorganisms in the intestines (see “The Microbiome Frontier”).

We need accurate words—and research—for recovery too. “Sleep Solutions" shines a light on how cancer and its treatments often disrupt sleep—and why taking simple steps to restore good sleep is so important for long-term recovery. Another way to improve quality of life is to work with an occupational therapist (see “Getting Your Life Back").

Healing—the word is related to “wholeness”—isn’t measurable, but it’s nevertheless essential. It’s different from cure. Jersi Baker (“A Breast Cancer Diary"), whose metastatic breast cancer is treatable but incurable, has found a healing path through advocacy, modeling and founding a nonprofit. Robin McGee (“I Thought I Was Cured"), who is facing serious setbacks now that her Stage III colorectal cancer has recurred, finds enduring strength in her advocacy for access to the best treatments for people with cancer.

In these pages, you’ll find more healing stories: a memory of kindness (“The Power of the Group"), an appreciation of caregivers (“Husband, Caregiver, Hero") and a tale of joy against the odds (“And Then There Were Three"). We need the words to tell these stories too.

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