

Do Strong Religious Beliefs Help Cancer Patients Battle the Disease Better?

Belief can make the difference for a life in transition. During difficult times when an individual must prioritize their health, a spiritual or religious faith can ease tensions, boost attitude and support overall improved **health**. Research strongly suggests that individuals with religious and spiritual beliefs cope better during their battle with cancer.

Prayer also leads to optimism, reduces stress and can bolster the immune system, studies say. According to a Women's Health Initiative study conducted by the U.S National Institute of Health, those who regularly attend religious services reduce their risk of death by 20 percent. In the book *God Changes Your Brain*, Dr. Andrew Newburg found that those who pray and meditate have a highly developed parietal lobe, which improves memory and improves wellbeing. An article in *Critical Care Clinics* states that prayer is the second most common form of **pain management**, next to oral medicine.

Because of these and other findings, increasingly, the medical community seeks to boost health by understanding and encouraging practices of belief. Tapping into strong spiritual practices and beliefs during a health care threat are the "X factor" in many cases of survival. Therefore, one cannot and must not ignore the profound opportunities that spiritual beliefs bring to the table of hope.

Part of my work with Our Journey of Hope (OJ0H) is to encourage the use of faith or religious or spiritual practices to promote wellness and facilitate an infrastructure of clergy and others with strong spiritual beliefs to provide a network

to help patients and their families to restore health.

OJ0H is a seven-hour training session for pastors and lay members to equip them with the tools and ideology to empower them to address and respond to the needs of individuals who are dealing with cancer. We teach caretakers as well. They are **empowered** by the belief that they, too, have access to a source greater than themselves to call upon for strength and help.

Our program was created by the **Cancer Treatment Centers of America** (CTCA) largely because of a suggestion from a patient and her husband. They asked if I would be willing to meet with local clergy persons that they knew for an informal discussion on cancer care and support from a faith perspective.

The importance of OJ0H to the treatment centers continues to position the organization as one of the leaders in the health care arena. We truly value and encourage the faith community to marshal the strength of its value system to fight back against cancer.

Faith works.

I have seen the power of faith and communities to change the lives of patients struggling with cancer. Thirteen years ago, Gloria fell into a coma. Family members asked if I would **pray** for her to regain consciousness. Soon after I prayed over her, Gloria opened her eyes and indeed regained consciousness. She is still living 13 years later.

A faith or **spiritual belief** assures cancer patients that it is possible to live through challenging health threats, regardless of the odds of long-term survival, and overcome the challenge. We don't disavow science. However, those who rely on science alone often wrestle with the limitations of humanity's knowledge. God has no limits. Faith and a spiritual belief are not rooted in limitation.

The best part of my work is providing a platform for genuine discussion for a topic that typically is ignored. The church and **faith** community in general lacks health care-related ministries organized in a meaningful way to address the very relevant issues surrounding this community of people. OJOH has equipped thousands to broach the subject of **cancer** with confidence and fearlessness. We have the opportunity to provide a meaningful relationship with pastors and their members concerning health care.

Ultimately, faith and spiritual beliefs equip individuals with the mental and emotional fortitude to withstand the travails and challenges of treatment and forge ahead in the effort to keep **cancer** at bay by tapping into a “power source” greater than themselves.

With engaged **spirituality** and informed clergy, caretakers and family, we can support all patients as they brace themselves to live their lives, overcome obstacles and seek **hope** in their darkest hours.