Finding Hope Through Cancer Support Groups

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Tips for Finding Comfort Through a Cancer Support Group

I would hazard a guess that we've all been affected by cancer in some way.

Maybe your mother, aunt, grandmother, or best friend has had cancer. Or perhaps you're reading this right now, and you are the one undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

And it's hard, right? Cancer *sucks.* I think we can all agree with that.

There is no easy way to "get through" cancer, but a support group may help.

What Are Cancer Support Groups?

The National Cancer Institute states that a cancer support group is defined as "meetings for people with cancer and anyone touched by the disease."

We can, of course, receive support from friends, family members, health care practitioners – anyone, really, that we feel connected to. But a cancer support group allows for members to join so that they can seek others with similar experiences.

For example, if you have breast cancer, you will likely be able to find a breast cancer support group. If you have lung cancer, you'll be able to find a lung cancer support group. If you are a cancer survivor, guess what? You'll find a cancer survivor group! There are even cancer support groups for caregivers, family members, and those who are grieving from the loss of a family member.

What Are the Benefits of Cancer Support Groups?

The benefits of a cancer support group are expansive – and only a fraction of people with cancer utilize them.

Support groups may:

- Give you a place to speak about your problems and feelings
- Allow you to not feel alone, as others are likely going through (or have gone through) similar issues
- Provide tips on dealing with your diagnosis
- Help you deal with issues
- Help you feel connected to other individuals
- Provide you the opportunity to help others
- Help you deal with the side effects of medications and treatments

Not convinced? Let's discuss the research.

When we evaluate research performed on breast cancer support groups, evidence suggests that support groups are highly beneficial.

A 2005 study evaluated five studies, each involving support groups for metastatic breast cancer. The study found that one study identified a potential increase in survival times as a result of participation in survival groups.

Other studies did not reveal this as a benefit from participation in support groups – but all studies revealed that participation in study groups greatly impacted psychological well-being.

How to Find Cancer Support Groups

If you'd now like to get out there and start to look for support groups, where should you look?

It depends on the type of support group you're looking for!

There are a variety of *types* of support groups. Of course, we've already discussed that you should narrow down what specific kind of group you're looking for (for example, are you the cancer sufferer, or the cancer caregiver?). Now it's time to find the *location* of the group.

Many support groups are in-person. They can be held in a variety of settings such as:

- Churches
- Hospitals
- Libraries
- Community centers
- Private homes

You can seek these types of support groups in several ways. You could ask your physician if he or she knows of any support groups. Your local newspaper may have a listing of upcoming support groups. Going to your local hospital website may also have a listing of upcoming support groups. And, as a sign of the times, Google may help you find upcoming support groups.

It is important to find the "right fit" – if you're not comfortable in a support group, you will not get what you're looking for from the group. Keep in mind that if you're a new member, it may take you time to get "warmed up," but you should begin to feel comfortable after a while. If you're not, it's time to try a new one!

You can also find support groups online and on Facebook. You may have to do a Google search, but you may find a discussion group that is just right for you. Facebook groups are becoming "big" too. Both of these are great options, especially if you live in a rural area, are not feeling well, or have a rare type of cancer, all of which make it difficult to get to a cancer support group.

The Bottom Line…

Cancer support groups are an excellent way to provide community and support, provide a connection while allowing you also to help others.