

The Power of Listening, Caring, and Loving  
By Dean Shrock, Ph.D.

As Director of Mind Body Medicine for a physician management group of 40 cancer centers, I was very interested in investigating the role of the will to live and how it might effect the quality and, potentially, the length of these patients' lives. I had interned with Dr. Carl Simonton and was greatly impressed with his work at the Simonton Cancer Center where he encouraged patients to make major changes in their lives that were more compatible with who they really were and that would take them in the direction of greatest joy.

Now I had the opportunity to implement this program and test a number of mind-body methods including the common sense approach: "When you're busy doing what you like to do, you tend to forget your aches and pains."

I began teaching this program, which I called "Taking Control of Your Health", in 1988, primarily to cancer centers in Central Pennsylvania. In 1996 I met Dr. Ray Palmer, an epidemiologist in the Biobehavioral Health Department at Penn State University, and he proposed a way we could measure the effectiveness of this program.

We asked tumor registrars in the three cancer centers/hospitals where the program had been offered most extensively to find patients who had the same type and stage of cancer to compare to the cancer patients in our program. The details of the study were published in May 1999 in the journal, *Alternative Therapies In Health and Medicine* and in my book, *Doctor's Orders: Go Fishing*. The results were that the intervention group lived significantly longer than did their matched-controls.

I found that when people were faced with a life-threatening situation that they usually began to reprioritize their lives. They began to rethink how they spend their time and how they want to spend the time they have left in their lives. Dusting? Washing dishes? Working 10 and 12 hour days?

It's not that cleaning the house or your job is not important; it's that the key, again, is balance. And when they became more starkly aware that their lifetime was limited, they started to do more of the things they loved to do and which mattered most to them. Their lives actually became richer and fuller oftentimes as a result of dealing with cancer.

What I believe made the greatest difference in why these people in my study lived longer was because they felt listened to and cared for. When I asked cancer patients and their families what they learned that helped them the most of all the things I taught, they said, "You listened, you cared, and you were sincere." This confused and surprised me at first. I spent two hours each week for six weeks teaching them about the will to live, the power of their beliefs, relaxation and guided imagery, stress management, and other coping skills, but they responded most to feeling supported.

While I'm certain that the will to live can affect one's quality and length of life, I also believe that feeling loved and cared for has inherent healing potential. I believe we have been told this throughout history. Now modern research is beginning to discover and support ancient wisdom.

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