

Message from my heart

**<< Come here, come here, come here,
The knowledge will conquer the fear >>**

Verse inspired by Shakespeare

To Women Who Suffer

Coping and Living with Cervical Cancer

Excerpts from the Book, "What Every Woman Should Know About Cervical Cancer," Springer, 2008

Challenging the Fear

Introduction, perception and action. Coping with a positive Pap test and coping with cervical cancer on a daily basis. Support from health providers, caregivers, family and friends. Support groups.

Cervical cancer is fearsome for those who have it or think they might get the disease in the future. It has serious emotional effect and take courage to carry on. Help is necessary and it is available. We will discuss separately how to cope with a positive Pap test (pre-cancer, cancer alert) and will devote the rest of this chapter on coping with cervical cancer on a daily basis. It is a continuation of the knowledge that you gained about medical treatment in the previous chapters. Here, we will discuss the importance of psychological factors and summarize how to use this kind of support that is available from health providers, caregivers, family and friends. Support groups and other professional support are also discussed.

Fear is a part of our lives, and we deal with fear almost on a daily basis. Health problems are among the most frequent stressors [10].

However, we differently perceive stress and react individually to stress. The same stressor may provoke quite a different reaction in different persons. For example, common sense dictates that fear of cervical cancer would motivate most women to go and take a Pap test. However, our Survey on the participation of women in Pap test and cervical cancer screening indicates that many do not take Pap test because they are afraid of the exam and even more of the result of this exam. These are educated women living in Washington Metro Area, but in spite of availability of medical care, they choose not to take a Pap test. They are afraid and rather do not want to know what is going on within their body. One highly educated university professor personally told me, she is so afraid that she would rather not know! This calls for education and for counseling of high school girls and women of all ages and categories. “The worst fear is from the fear itself!” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

How to Cope When the Result is Abnormal Pap Test?

Another question is how to approach and help women who take the Pap test and get an abnormal/positive result (dysplasia, pre-cancer). Again, fear could paralyze a woman from acting! The attitude of the nurse, who first informs a woman about the positive Pap test is very important. Some women complain that they are informed almost a month after the test is taken, and this is the first wrong step creating resistance and declining confidence in the health provider. “Why didn’t the nurse and/or the doctor inform me on time and advise me what to do? They do not care!” This is a normal defensive reaction. How different it could be if a nurse calls a woman on time, approaches her carefully explaining that there is something that is not normal, but not cancer, and advise her to schedule an appointment with her doctor who will provide more detailed information. Every woman would immediately schedule the appointment, gladly visit her doctor and follow the advice that he/she is providing. These women will certainly feel more comfortable to continue the follow-up examinations.

Small things to do that mean so much! Doctors and nurses have different attitudes and bedside manners, but kindness, patience and right information given at the right time should motivate every

woman to successfully cope with the problem, not to discourage and inhibit her to actively participate in the treatment. Even the strongest women are fragile dealing specifically with gynecological diseases, which have a particular impact on their emotions and they will certainly appreciate support and help. As soon as a woman is assured that she does not have cancer and has confidence in the health provider, she is motivated to educate herself about the condition that will further increase her confidence. One positive action creates and leads to another positive action.

One of the aims of this book is to collect information about cervical cancer in one place, making this book a woman's friendly companion: Our goal is to educate, to encourage, to ignite optimism and action and to further motivate her to solve her problem. We intend to explain that pre-cancer is not yet cancer, and there are straightforward options available for immediate treatment. Depending on the grade of the abnormality, the doctor will advise different diagnostic procedures (colposcopy, biopsy), and then an appropriate treatment. Remember, the Pap test is only a screening test. Colposcopy and biopsy clarify the diagnosis. These procedures and the follow-up treatment (if cancer is excluded) are not so difficult to experience, particularly knowing that the problem will be soon removed from the first place on the priority list.

In the meantime, waiting results can be frustrating. This is where friends and family are needed to talk, encourage that most likely it is pre-cancer and that they will all help her to decide with her doctor for the best option how to proceed. You can always say: "Let us first hear about the result".

When the new result will arrive, the doctor will discuss with a woman, explaining her the meaning of the result and will suggest treatment. I would recommend going to this appointment with a member of the family or with a close friend. It is good if all involved are already educated about a positive Pap test and can help asking educated questions. This book is one-stop resource for that. Remember, you are the best advocate about your health! In rare occasions a woman, at least in the beginning, would try to handle everything alone not asking for a company – this should be respected, and family/friends should wait until she is asking for support.

Now, the recommendation depends on the level of the abnormality (level of dysplasia). The doctor may suggest different procedures (conization, LEEP, cryosurgery, laser therapy). Some doctors may even suggest hysterectomy for a woman who does not have intention of having more children. You can immediately decide and continue with the treatment, or ask for a little bit time to consider the options. The time that you may ask for consideration depends on the level of dysplasia, and the doctor will tell you whether an immediate action is required (within two weeks, for example), or you can postpone the decision. If this is the case, than educate yourself further about your specific situation, read recommended literature, talk with others and you may ask for second opinion. Once you make the decision, you should act promptly so you can get beyond the problem. Again, pre-cancer is curable, the procedures are usually not so difficult, recuperation is relatively fast, and you can continue with your life. Only control follow-up will continue. This is why it is important to have Pap smear done regularly, so you can catch the disease in the early pre-cancer stage, solve the problem and continue to be a healthy and active woman.

According to the results, the doctor may even decide to wait for few months for spontaneous resolution of the problem. Instead to being stressed and nervous, you should be motivated to learn more about the abnormal Pap test, and instead of being nervous and fearful, increase your resistance lowering stress, eating healthy food, having sufficient rest, balancing your activities and carrying on an active, normal life.

The Diagnosis is Cervical Cancer

What if the diagnosis is already cervical cancer? Then, a woman needs all the support she can get from everybody: Family, health providers, friends, support groups. Again, fighting the fear and encouraging her that there is help available is very important. Showing kindness and compassion is critical approach from the health provider, beginning from the receptionist, to the nurse and doctors.

At this point, the most important next step is to determine the stage of the disease and make the best plan for treatment. If the cancer is only localized (carcinoma *in situ*), the chances are again excellent for recovery. If the cancer has already been spread, it is difficult, but possible to restrict its growth, improve the quality of life, and prolong life for years. Do not despair, with today's diagnostic and treatment options every woman can be treated and continue with her life. However, the treatment will take longer and will be more expensive. This situation is serious and requires lot of courage from the patient, support from family and a good health provider's team who will be leading her and helping her throughout the process.

Most doctors have a policy to be honest about the diagnosis, treatment options and prognosis. This is a good starting point for a trusted relationship. Making an immediate program for action will ignite hope that there are capable professionals to guide her during the process. Introducing her to other specialists (surgeons, specialized oncologists, radiologists) and good coordination between the primary physician and other doctors is again a confirmation for a sick woman that she is in good hands.

Otherwise, searching for second opinion is very frustrating for a patient at this moment – this is another fear that she may offend the primary physician and his team. What she will do then? One fear induces another fear and a vicious cycle is formed that can harm the patient and the prospective for treatment of the disease. Time is lost; frustrations disturb appetite, sleep and rest which further aggravate the situation. Because emotional factors are so important to cope with this hardship, mind–body connection should be directed in a positive direction to help, not to aggravate the disease

Support from Caregivers and Close Family in Day-by-Day Coping with the Disease

The role and the support of the members of the family become extremely important. There is a saying: “If one member of the family has cancer, the whole family is ill.” This is a big truth! In order to really provide support, family member who will be

involved in everyday contacts with the patient (or other caregivers) should also read this book and understand the problems. There are many delicate issues to deal with, and patients may easily lose the confidence in the caregiver during these trying times. After that, the patient simply does not want to share feelings and fears anymore. That is not good for anybody. I would also suggest that caregivers avoid general statements like “Everything is going to be all right”; because this will not be the case if certain steps are not taken. Knowing that something is wrong, most women want to know the truth from the beginning.

Rarely, it might be necessary not to reveal the whole situation in the beginning, but in my opinion, the truth should be told as soon as possible, with an optimistic outcome in order to gain patient’s full collaboration to participate in the battle against the disease. In any case, one member of the close family must be fully informed of the situation.

What about advanced cancer? Surgery is a mutilating procedure removing a part of the body. Radiation is tissue destruction and chemotherapy is toxic with effects of the entire body. Treating advanced cancer is not an easy task and it is difficult to achieve a substantial improvement. In these situations patients and their families easily lose hope and turn to alternative and complementary medicine options. Even doctors, who are also family members, may become wrong advisors. This is a moment when coping with the disease turns into coping with death as an inevitable outcome. It is a new situation and requires selective approach. Hope must never be destroyed; on the contrary every effort should be made to nourish it (see next paragraph – new treatments).

This book is an excellent introduction also for family members faced with the support and care of cervical cancer patient. Reading this book, the family could learn about the disease and how to approach the patient. One of the most important advices from a family will be to motivate the patient to fight the disease and to continue with further tests and treatment. If she is comfortable with her gynecologist/oncologist, the follow-up and treatment should start as soon as possible. Believe or not, when things start to happen (analysis after analysis, treatment after treatment), it is easier than the initial period immediately after receiving a bad news that you have cancer and do not know, or have not decided what to do.

Denial and anger, depression and refusal to continue with tests and start the treatment (that are common in the beginning) are even more difficult to cope. There is a long way to go, different problems to deal and it is sometimes even more difficult for a caregiver than for the patient. There will be time of treatment, recovery from treatment, cancer-free period, a period when cancer returns, and the advanced stages. Constant emotional support is needed with a positive focus in the future, a hope for better, including repeatedly reminding the cancer patient that the ongoing research is constantly finding new ways for treatment and help. This is the whole truth – new diagnostic methods are being constantly discovered (particularly imaging technologies), new biomarkers are being found to lead to better and faster diagnosis, new encouraging drug treatments are being developed (targeting cancer cells only, antibody treatments, drug that do not kill the cancer cell but reprogram it, genetic treatment), new radiation therapies (more targeted), new surgical, less aggressive procedures (e.g., procedures that do not require classic surgery, but are done with a small cut on the body, e.g., cryoablation), etc. Cancer is certainly not what it were 5–10 years ago. There is a tremendous source for hope now.

The role of the family is also to create, as much as possible, a healthy atmosphere at home. Thus the time spend between hospitals, exams and treatment will become healing time. Lowering the level of stress in the family, an optimistic outlook, a warm atmosphere of caring and love are extremely important. Mind-body connection exists and sometimes this connection may work in favor or may further harm the patient. The family has an important task in this effort to help their loved one. Engaging the patient in some work and household activities, accordingly to her current status (in consultation with the physician) is also important for the well-being of the patient. She will feel that she continues to contribute to the family and will not be occupied thinking only about the disease. This is a trying time for the family and anxious time for patients.

Cancer patients have so much anxiety in their lives (worrying about staying alive – an uncertain immediate future, financial problems, pain, job changing), that some patients transform their anxiety into harsh behavior towards caregivers. They even try to fight with caregivers who are only trying to help. Caregivers should

understand that this is temporary change of behavior and should simply overlook these episodes.

Also, there are instances of recollection and analyzing what was done and patients blame themselves and others for something that has been done or should have been done differently in the past. This is again a normal reaction of regrets and apologizes. The best thing is to persuade the patient that this is past history, these actions cannot be changed now and everyone should move forward. Caregivers also should plan time to relax and should call on other members of the family to help.

The family and caregivers have to be educated on ways how to protect the cancer patient from infections, particularly during treatment and early recovery. It means, if somebody in the family gets the flu or some other type of infection, this person should be isolated from direct contact with the patient. Infections may compromise and disrupt the recovery. The same should be related to friends and visitors without exceptions.

For both patients and caregivers, it is particularly hard to cope during the period of treatment (chemotherapy, radiation). The patient suffers from the side effects of treatment, and it is so difficult for the family to see the loved one suffering. Inform the doctor about each side effect (e.g., vomiting, pain, nausea) and ask for instructions how to cope or whom you may contact for further help. These symptoms are directly related to treatment and gradually disappear. The social services department in the hospital of your doctor's office may be of some help, or may direct you to somebody else who might be able to help.

Support of Extended Family and Friends

What about extended family and friends? Everybody can do some good, sometimes just being a good listener. Let patient tells you about her problems. However, if she is not willing to talk, do not insist. If she decides to confide in you "listen with your heart", do not try immediately to change her feeling and behavior. Let her feel that you are there for her, she can come back to you and can count on you. Cancer is a serious disease and a complex approach is

needed, but everybody in the patient's circle of friends and family could help with something. Do not be surprised that the strongest women when faced with a diagnosis of cancer will "need people" to listen and to help in many different ways. It is a long way to go! Lot of adjustments are needed at different points of time, at different types of treatment and different stages of the disease. Family must adjust to these stages and provide at all times a continuous emotional support, encouragement and hope. Emotional status of the patient is so important for the success, and this is the least a family can do. Once she is not with the family anymore, grief and condolences will not help. The help is needed when she can have benefit of it

Support Groups

There are cases when husbands ask for divorce when women get sick or a woman may not have close family, and friends are not always available. There is other help that is available within the hospital (support groups), in the community in American Cancer Society local chapters and non-profit organizations discussion groups on-line, e.g., National Cervical Cancer Coalition, NCCC (<http://www.nccc-online>). The address and more can be found in Further Reading. Women who suffer from the same disease share their experiences, ask for advice, follow-up with other women in same situation, encourage and provide emotional support. "I can cope" educational programs, community classes and on line classes can be found on the ACS web site (www.cancer.gov), under ACS Support Programs and Services.

You will find also other useful links in the Section 3.5. Rely primarily on ACS, FDA, NIH, NCI, other government agencies, hospitals and universities, and established organizations, like NCCC and similar.

Living with Cancer

**<<To fight or to fight not,
This is the question now>>**
Inspired by Shakespeare

What else can I learn and do to help myself?

Complementary and alternative medicine. Holistic view of the six dimensions of health. Strategies in stress release

What is alternative and what is complementary medicine? Mind/body/spirit interventions and other complementary approaches. You must consult your doctor before taking any step toward using any alternative or complementary treatments.

The six dimensions of health: Physical, emotional, mental, social, spiritual and environmental health.

Stress release is one of the mind/body interventions that are recognized by both conventional and complementary medicine. In this chapter, you will learn more about stress, its mechanism in order to fight it more successfully. Different stress coping strategies are also described in sufficient details to be helpful for every woman.

In the beginning of this chapter, let us explain the meaning of some frequently used terms in conventional medical practices. *Standard treatment* means that this is evidence-based medical treatment tested under strict guidelines and found to be safe and useful. *Investigational treatment* (called also *clinical trial*) is a treatment that has been studied first *in a laboratory, in vitro* (e.g., on human cultured cells), followed by *research in vivo* (on experimental animals). When proven to be safe and promising, a research treatment protocol is designed which, when approved by Food and Drug Administration (FDA, www.fda.gov), is used for humans in a controlled study. This controlled study is a clinical trial. When the results of the clinical trials show credible evidence that the

treatment is safe and effective it becomes a standard treatment. The treatment is to be approved by FDA.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Complementary and alternative medicines are different practices. They are not a part of conventional medicine which is practiced by medical doctors (MD) or doctors of osteopathy (OD). The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health defines *alternative and complementary medicine* as “health care practices that are not integral part of the conventional medicine” [33, 81, 86, 131]. Whatever the definition is, no alternative or complementary medicine cures cancer. It is not possible to overemphasize the need to tell your doctor if you intend to use any alternative or complementary treatment because it may be potentially harmful and interfere with the conventional medicine treatment that you are taking.

Alternative therapy is unproven therapy that is used instead of proven, standard therapy. Some alternative therapy may have dangerous, even life-threatening effects. Never replace conventional medical treatment, such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation that has been proven for treatment of cancer and prolonging survival, for unproven alternative approaches. An example of alternative therapy is Homeopathic medicine, remedies made of very small doses of herbs, minerals, animal products, or diluted chemicals. There is no scientific evidence that homeopathic remedies are effective therapy in cancer patients [81, 110].

Complementary therapy is used in addition to standard, conventional medicine therapies. It may help alleviate side effects of chemotherapy, improve the patient sense of well-being and the quality of life by controlling pain, relieving physical distress and helping the patient improve emotionally. Some examples of complementary therapy are stress release techniques (e.g., relaxation strategies), peppermint tea for nausea or acupuncture to reduce pain. Again, you should consult you doctor before using any complementary therapy [4].

It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss in detail different complementary and alternative therapies that are available. We will provide only a general overview. Some of them are using dietary supplements, e.g., antioxidants, which are hoped to “clean” the body from oxidative damage (green tea, vitamin E), other supplements (vitamin A, D), shark cartilage, different herbs, etc. You will be directed to further readings for these issues in Literature Cited and Section 3.5. Again, talk to your doctor – even vitamins are not allowed during some chemotherapy treatment. It is also worth mentioning that it is not necessarily true that products derived from plants are “natural” and therefore safe. Have also in mind that food supplements are not always regulated, not put under rigorous testing and manufacturing procedures, so their purity, quality and content may be questionable.

Other complementary and alternative medicine modalities are acupuncture, homeopathy, natural energy restoration, naturopathy. Please see further readings on alternative and complementary medicine in Section 3.5. We particularly recommend to visit the National Institutes of Health’s Center for Alternative and Complementary Medicine and the American Cancer Society web sites provided in this part of the book [4, 137].

In any case, we suggest that you gather information, discuss your options and evaluate treatment providers. Ask for references about the practitioner who offers the treatment, check governmental listings that regulate and license health providers, consider the cost. Again, be very cautious with complementary and alternative therapies and research in details all available sources. Do not hesitate to consult your doctor! Doctors know that majority of cancer patients use some kind of complementary medicine.

Sedatives and antidepressants, as a supportive care, are also frequently used for cancer patients in different occasions.

At the end of this chapter, you will have a chance to read about issues related to healthy eating. Diet is so important in health and disease that we decided to provide an overview on this subject based on both traditional medicine and dietetic point of view.

Mind-body connection has been proven and stress does decrease our immunity to diseases and affects our organ systems. Living with cancer, stress becomes a part of our everyday lives: Being

suspicious that something is wrong with us, visit a doctor to find out what is wrong, waiting for the result, cope with the result, pass through treatments, remissions and re-occurrences – these are all serious stressors. However, the stress could be controlled. Our book, we hope, will help to maneuver easier through a labyrinth of options, skills, knowledge and wisdom to find what is the best for you to have a less stressful life and how you can help yourselves and teach others to pass through difficult times with less psychological scars.

In general, there are two main factors that contribute to the severity of stress. The imminence of the stressful event and the ignorance about strategies needed to cope. More imminent the stressful situation is and more ignorant we are, the greater the stress is. We cannot help you to change the imminence of the stressful situation, neither you can have control on that. There are situation in life when we cannot change the imminence of unpleasant situations approaching us “without invitation”. However, you may try, whenever you can and as much as you can, to allow yourself some time to think, plan and decide. This rule applies to everyday normal life, but particularly in trying times of great stress like a grave disease.

Contrary, I think we can offer suggestions of ways how to cope more easily. This is why the next sections are devoted to this important issues.

Holistic View of Health and Wellness

Health problems are the main stressors in our lives. After realizing that we have a diagnosis of cancer, we are faced with our own mortality. Suddenly our whole life is changed. Things that were so important to us became of much lesser priority. The feelings of shock, disbelief, anxiety, depression, sadness and anger started to build up. We fall asleep and awake with the same thought: I have cancer, am I going to die and what am I going to do now?

Alleviating stress is becoming an important strategy to fight cancer. Proven stress-release techniques may become a part of standard treatment, not only the complementary treatment. Stress,

particularly chronic stress (that is exactly the situation with cancer patients) is very harmful for our body. Alleviating stress we sleep and eat better, increase our immunity and think more rationally. It is time to start working on that. As for everything else in order to fight something you have to know more about what you are fighting.

I was teaching stress release strategies one-semester courses at universities for years and I saw how people struggle to relieve stress with more or less success. I will try to explain to you what is stress and it's mechanism and to inform you about some important strategies that you might use for self-help. There is not a general recipe and there is no one-strategy suggestion. It is always a combination of strategies, and you may change those strategies in time; in addition, different stressors may require different techniques for coping. Although some of these strategies are harmless (mental relaxation, meditation), you still need to inform your doctor about your intentions/efforts to release stress and check with him/her whether and how much some of them (for example exercise, yoga) you are allowed in this particular point of your disease or treatment. In many hospitals, you may find organized stress release help like courses, workshops and groups under the supervision of professionals. This is a trusted and easy resource you can use.

In order to better understand stress and plan strategies to alleviate it, you should be aware that besides physical health (that is now disturbed by your diagnosis), there are other dimensions of health, not directly affected by the cancer that you can engage to improve and become healthier (Fig. 3.1a) [25, 59, 72, 99]. This will, in turn, help you battle with the physical problems.

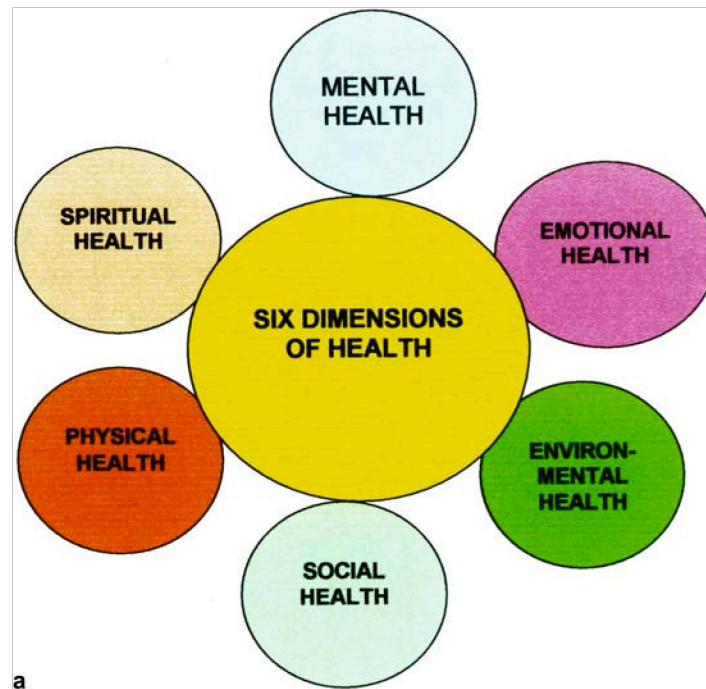


Fig. 3.1a The six dimensions of health

Which are Other Dimensions of Health Described as a Holistic Health Model?

These are:

- Emotional health (feeling component, our feelings and how we deal with them)
- Mental/intellectual health (ability to learn, intellectual capabilities to process information clearly and accurately, decision making process)
- Social health (ability to have satisfying relationships)
- Spiritual health (a sense of meaning of value in life, belief in supreme being) and
- Environmental health (appreciation of the external environment)

The World Health Organization (WHO) is defining health as a complete physical, mental and social well-being. Spiritual and emotional health (and most recently environmental health), were added as dimensions of health [175].

Rule #1 People's ability to manage stress is influenced by the degree of which they function optimally in each of these dimensions.

I will present to you some examples to better understand those others dimensions of health that you may not had a chance to concentrate on before. Again, it is time now to think of strengthening these components of your health in order to improve your physical health more efficiently.

How We can Achieve a Higher Level of Wellness Across all Dimensions of Health?

For example, let's talk about improving social health. It is known that people with supportive social relationships (family, friends, coworkers) are better able to cope with problems and better manage stress; a well functioning social support network helps dispel the negative effects of stressors when you are exposed to them. We were already talking about the support of family and friends in the previous chapter. Cultivating good relationships takes compassion, energy, time, patience, nurturing and sometimes forgiveness. However, sincere, good relationships with right people help to counteract the negative effects of stressors, and the feeling that there is somebody there when you need him/her make us more stress resistant. Isolation is a serious risk factor for stress.

A key to understand spirituality is to view it as moderator of life events, daily hassles, and chronic pressures. It is one of the factors that are taken in consideration when evaluating one's ability to cope with stress. The main component of spirituality is religion, belief in a higher power, divine being – belief in God, but also includes our faith in life, nature, justice, our connectedness with the environment, and our belief in doing good for others beyond ourselves. Spirituality affects patient perceptions of their illnesses, their faith and ability to get well, their will to live, their behavior during illness. *Spiritually mature people have increased ability to cope with crises and greater ability to handle stress.*

Ask your health care team about the resources available at your hospital. Some members of the clergy are specially trained to help cancer patients. Big hospitals, like Mayo Clinic, have chaplains available and when you are admitted into the hospital, you may find

in your room material from your religion to read. This is comforting for the patient.

Emotional and mental (intellectual) health are also a determining factors how we perceive stress and how we handle stressful situations [109].

Improving emotional health is may be the most difficult task of all. This is why we will discuss this issue in more details, pointing to some strategies that might be helpful.

Our emotional health depends very much on our personality. Personality is a collection of thoughts, attitudes, values, believes, perceptions, and behaviors defining how we see ourselves and the world around us. Briefly, there are three types of personalities (A, B, C) and many subtypes (a combination of them,) but when it comes to stress there are only two: Stress-resistant and stress-prone personality types [25, 72]. There are opinions that stress prone personality types (type C) are more susceptible to cancer. People with an attitude to give up and to develop a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness are more prone to cancer and have worse survival [10, 157, 167]. Psychoimmunology, a new scientific discipline is confirming the connection of stress and diseases [67].

We cannot change our personality very much, but we can try to improve ourselves by learning more about emotional health or seeking help when needed (from family, friends and professionals) in order to put our feelings under control, and not to allow them to guide us to an inappropriate decision. Do not use drugs that may cause addiction. Do not drink alcohol. Seek help from professionals (psychologist, life coaches, social workers, psychiatrists) without shame. Some of them specialize in helping cancer patients.

Let me give you some examples of what we could do. One strategy is a very well known power of “Positive Thinking”. We could learn to try finding a positive side in every event – if you try, you will find something good and useful, even you cannot recognize it in the beginning. Usually, under stress, we simply do not see the positive side of things. Typing a word “positive thinking quotes” in the search window of the Internet, you can find lot of literature about positive thinking and powerful quotes on this subject [149]. For example “The positive thinker sees the invisible, feels the intangible and achieves the impossible”... or the famous Winston

Churchill quote” A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity and the optimist sees the opportunity on every difficulty”. Or, you may choose to read books on the subject [125, 147].

It is also recommended to try to reduce the “Negative Self-talk” (sub-vocal talking to oneself), repeatedly torturing yourself with negative self-messages that then become secondary stressors. Particularly, if this self-talk and blaming you continues long after the stress does not exist any more. It will also help if you seek company with people who nurture your feelings, not those who hurt them.

There is another powerful strategy that could help us in improving our emotional health, emphasizing that we can keep our negative feelings, accept them, but we can learn to transform them into a productive behavior. This is the essence of Morita therapy, based on Buddhism, teaching us that that we can acknowledge distressing thoughts and feelings, but get beyond them by engaging ourselves in doing something productive [75, 150, 151]. The more creative the engagement is, the greater the success. Write, paint, create something new, or just clean the bathroom, help somebody else, finish some other obligations that you have postponed.

I use this technique myself. I acknowledge my feelings, they are realistic, based on a real stressor, they are here and I do not want to just forget about them until the stressor is present. But I will not allow the stress from those feelings to paralyze me and to control me. At the time of actual stress (of course, if it is not something that requires immediate action), I just work, create a new text, plan a new experiment and conduct it, help somebody else, exercise, try to concentrate on the new task at that moment and examine my feelings just a little bit later. You will be surprised how your understanding of the feelings improves, new solutions emerge and everything seems easier than perceived before. There is a saying: “Morning is wiser than evening.” The negative feelings may even slowly transform into positive feelings. This will boost our self-esteem that you can live a productive life in spite of having distressing thoughts and feelings that the life is bringing.

Also, be good to yourself, forgive yourself if you make mistakes, everybody makes them and you already learned how to forgive others. You may think now that it is easier to say than to do, but let

grace and love guide your way instead of revenge, hostility and anger.

Try to enjoy life more as much as you can. We need to have fun from time to time to reach high level of emotional health. This is not a lost time, as we frequently think, contrary we will perform better if we care enough to increase our emotional wellness and emotional well-being.

How can we enrich our intellectual (mental) capabilities. This is easier than taking control of our feelings. It means expanding our general base of knowledge, particularly learning about the disease and gathering information on how to combat it. This will strengthen your capability to think rationally in stressful situations, our problem solving logic and reason to guide us through difficult times. If we are informed about the issue, we better process the information, come to better decision and perceive the stress sometimes even more as a challenge than as an immediate threat not having the ability to solve.

I suggest that you use this book as your guide for learning and to refer to it periodically, as necessary. Learn about cervical cancer. Knowledge diffuses stress and fear about unknown and gives us power. This fact has been acknowledged by women that suffered from cervical cancer, they quote “Ignorance creates fear, knowledge is a power”. Please read the letters from real people who suffered from cancer how they feel about learning more about the disease and how to cope with it (Section 3.3). You may also expand more in the recommended selective readings provided in Section 3.5. However, I would not encourage a patient to start reading professional medical literature aimed for medical professionals, because sometimes you may be exposed to many information and terms that you do not understand, what could be only frightening, not helpful.

The improvement of *the environmental health* depends not only on the individual, but it is more a result of collective effort. Everybody could do something to improve the environment in different ways for the benefit of all. It is easier to deal with problems when your environment is better, supportive and creates better access to services, and day-to-day better quality of life.

Understanding the Mechanism of Stress

In the same spirit, learning more about the enemy that is harming us and of fighting it more successfully, let us now help you learn more about stress itself. What is stress all about? Is it a normal reaction to threat? What is happening in our body during stress? Why is the stress harmful? How I can become a more stress-resistant person? Which stress release strategies are available?

Stress is a normal reaction of our body when we feel threatened and perceive that our balance is disturbed. The state of balance in our body is called homeostasis. Our body responds to change to return to homeostasis. This adaptive response is called General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), described by Hans Selye [159]. Any event that requires a person to adjust, make changes or expend resources has potential to be stressful. Negative or unpleasant events, uncontrollable, unpredictable and ambiguous events, particularly those that are imminent are perceived as stressors. Since a positive Pap test is a perception of threat, it is normal to feel stressed; even more so with a diagnosis cervical cancer. Everybody will perceive this event as a stress, the difference being only in the stress level and the reaction to stress based on personality and the level of health in other dimensions. When you are in a hospital you may be asked to determine your level of stress on a scale of 1–10.

According to GAS there are three phases of stress response: Alarm, Resistance and Exhaustion (Fig. 3.1b) [59, 126, 159].

What happens in our body in the first moment, during the first phase of stress? This phase is called the alarm phase. It is exactly an alarm to prepare the body for action. Since extra energy is needed, adrenal glands (the glands located near the top of kidneys) release the hormone

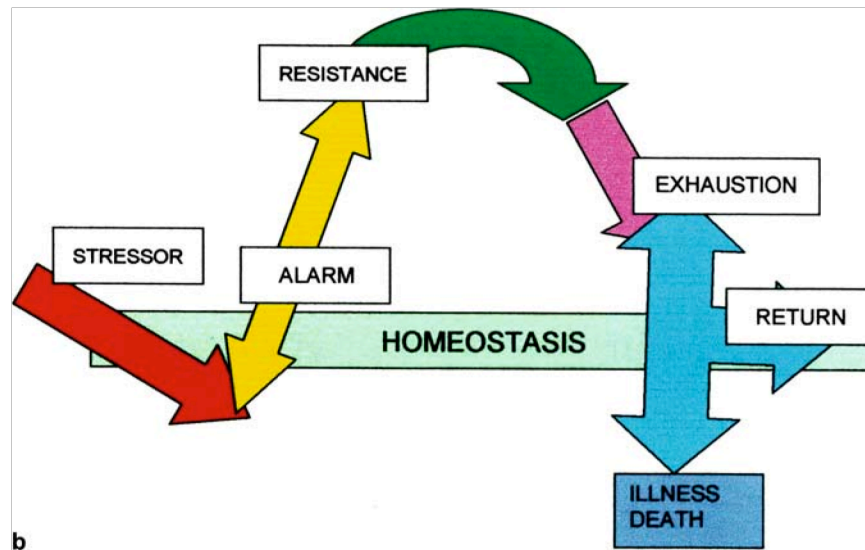


Fig. 3.1b General Adaptation Syndrome – GAS

adrenalin. Adrenalin stimulates the heart to pump more blood and supply the body (particularly the brain) with extra needed blood, dilates respiratory small airways to increase air flow and oxygen needed to fight, increases breathing rate, dilates the pupils and stimulates the liver to release more sugar in the blood for more energy. As you can see, this is a signal to combat threat, a positive reaction of the body. For example, when we are driving a car and somebody is about to hit us, the alarm is helping us to act immediately and save our life. You may find in some popular books the citation “fight-or-flight” phase. It means bodily response options available in coping with stressors to either confront the stressor (fight) or to avoid it (flight).

The alarm phase is not so harmful because lasts very short time (minutes or seconds), until the stressor is removed. However, if the stressor is not removed (like hearing a bad news about an existing disease) it is followed by the second resistant phase of stress response. This phase is induced again by hormones of the suprarenal glands, glycocorticoids-cortisol, mineralocorticoids and other hormones of the outer part of the gland called cortex. These hormones are responsible for adjusting various organs and glands to produce more energy to sustain the increased demand to keep the

body into balance. The body is more capable of responding, but for a price of increased demand to the body. This phase, if it is allowed to last long is very harmful and the body may enter the exhaustion phase which could actually caused illness or aggravation of the existing illness.

Stress directly affects our cardiovascular system, the endocrine system, muscles, the immune system, digestive system, and affects our mind. In reality, the stress is practically ruining our body. When we hear the bad news about cervical cancer, we probably cannot avoid experiencing the short alarm phase, but we certainly should not allow ruining our body keeping it in the resistance phase for too long. By alleviating the stress we should allow our body to slowly progress into the recovery phase that will help us to fight the cancer itself. This chapter is aimed to help you to alleviate stress, become more stress resistant and allow your body to proceed in the recovery phase and to return to homeostasis.

How can we alleviate stress?

At any given moment our ability to interpret and react to stressors is influenced by the level of wellness across ALL the six dimensions of health. We cannot have 100% wellness in all these dimensions, but we should strive to increase this wellness level (as discussed earlier) as much as possible. This is the first and the most important strategy that will make us more stress resistant. If the physical health is disturbed by the disease, we should strive to increase the level of wellness in the other dimensions to help us pass through difficult time of illness. When we are functioning efficiently emotionally, we will be able to better control our emotions, and less likely to react inappropriately. When we have a proper level of social well-being, we are aware of social resources to help us in time of need. Spiritual maturity gives us faith and serves as a buffer against stress. Mental health helps us to process information properly, think rationally and logically, come to an educated decision – knowledge decreases fear from ignorance and gives us power and better control of our lives. It is also easier to deal with problems when your environment is supportive and create better quality of life. Certainly, our commitment to improve our physical health will become even more – our life-time dedication.

NOTE: References cited in this text can be found in the book "What every woman should know about cervical cancer" (p.195), available at www.amazon.com. The text and references can be read for free from the electronic edition of the book. Also, references can be obtained upon request from the Global Academy.

If you are interested to learn more about Different Stress Release Strategies, they are also described in the Book In case, you have problems retrieving the text, contact us , we will send you this chapter.

Dr. Markovic taught one-semester course on "Strategies in Stress Release" at colleges and universities in the Washington Metro.