Finding a strong sense of meaning or purpose in life is often neither an easy nor an automatic achievement. Sometimes it takes being faced with our own mortality for people to find greater meaning in life. Indeed several researchers have found that it is not uncommon for people dealing with trauma or serious, even terminal, illness to talk about finding positive meaning, positive growth, or benefits out of their experience (Cordova et al., 2001; Manne et al., 2004; Sears et al., 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; and Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). So for those who speak of finding such positive meaning, what is it that they find? To address this question, I spent the past few years conducting in-depth interviews with 23 women who were living with a life-threatening illness, metastatic breast cancer.

In the U.S., one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. Many of these women who are diagnosed with more localized disease will recover well and may even be cured with treatment. However for those women in whom the cancer metastasizes, or spreads to other areas of the body, the disease is no longer considered curable, and average life expectancy is only a few years. Along with the threat of early mortality, women with metastatic breast cancer may also struggle with the pain and disfigurement of toxic treatments, the frustration over time sacrificed to doctors’ appointments and treatment schedules, the anxiety of an endless barrage of scans and tests, and the fear of an increasing loss of control over their body and their life.

In addition, the weight of financial concerns due to relentless medical bills, the stress of increased relationship turmoil, the loss of ability to work, and the threat to one’s self-identity are other challenges that cancer sometimes imposes. Nonetheless, despite such suffering and loss, roughly half of the women in my study also talked about how they had found positive meaning, benefits, or growth out of their experiences with cancer across multiple domains of their lives.

One of the most common areas of benefit finding was that of a positive change in perspective, especially a keener awareness, clarity, and focus that accompanied an enhanced sense of appreciation of the little things, the everyday moments, in life. Some went as far as to call cancer a “gift,” and a few even talked about how they were more joyful and happier than they had been before cancer. One
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woman who had suffered multiple medical procedures and side-effects, and who spent most of her days confined to a friend’s sofa, even made the following rather astounding statement:

_I feel my perspective has changed on life generally in that . . . this is gonna sound really crazy. . . . I feel like, for me, having the added blessing of getting cancer at the particular time that I did, has only enriched my life and deepened it and made it more manageable. . . . Yes, I feel like it’s changed tremendously. . . . Now I just feel like I’ve been set free . . . and I could die tomorrow, and I will have had a wonderful life . . . that’s really how I feel. I feel like this has just been . . . Well, for me, it was a gift._

Despite numerous losses, most of the women I interviewed also claimed an improvement in their sense of self and their self-esteem as a result of their experience with cancer. These women stated that they had become stronger, more confident, more aware of their personal resources, less socially inhibited, and more likely to stand up for themselves. For some, this emerged out of the awareness of how alone they were in living with life-threatening illness and out of the necessity of becoming their own advocate in the arena of the medical world. For others, learning to ask for help, and seeing how people rallied around and supported them in their time of need, made them feel more loved, and acted to strengthen their self-esteem.

Although cancer sometimes brought out the worst in loved ones and friends, more than half of the women in the study also talked about overall improvements in their relationships. Some mentioned that their family members, especially their children, respected them more because of how they had dealt with the cancer. Others said that they had become closer to loved ones because they had more time to spend with them and because they shared more in their relationships. In the words of one woman:

_[My husband] wasn’t always a good guy. He made a big change when [I] was diagnosed . . . . In the blink of an eye, our whole lives were totally different . . . . He showed me that he was a safe place to be . . . . [My husband] and I have a much better marriage . . . . When this all happened he showed me he was a person I could trust, and I let down my guard._

For some of the women, their experience with cancer also profoundly deepened their feeling of a spiritual connection, gave them a strong sense of a mission, and/or liberated them to focus on goals that enhanced their sense of purpose in life. Ironically, despite the suffering and anxiety of having a time-limiting illness, a majority of the women claimed they felt more patient, and especially more compassionate, toward people in general (not just others with cancer). First-hand experience with suffering strengthened these women’s understanding of _how_ to help others as it also stimulated a desire for them to share their experiences.

One somewhat surprising finding was that several of the women living with this terrible disease talked about how they felt _less_ stressed and _less_ worried since living with cancer. Little everyday annoyances bothered these women less, in part because they felt more justified in releasing themselves from negative people and events in their lives. Since the future of the disease was bleak and unpredictable, and time was too precious to waste on regrets about the past, women with metastases were often forced to focus on living in and savoring the present moment. In the words of one 52-year-old woman in active treatment (chemotherapy) for metastatic disease:

_I’m less worried. I think I’m really truly less worried than I used to be. Less anxious. . . . you know at work you’re always worried about goals for the end of the year, and a presentation you have to make in two weeks, or something. And I don’t live that way anymore. . . . I think that living very much in the present, it’s, it’s certainly taken a lot of stress off of my life. . . . I’ve always been anxious and thinking about the future, and I do that less. It’s been refreshing. I think it’s made me a happier person._

In sum, although many of the women I interviewed acknowledged finding positive meaning, even “gifts”, as a result of dealing with cancer, all of the women recognized these benefits had come at a tremendous cost. One woman who throughout our interviews had spoken about the
positive growth and benefits she had experienced also had the following to say about the price she had paid for these realizations:

*It would be nice . . . if nature could find some other way to get you an appreciation of life without having this . . . My cousin once said to me—“It's the best thing that's happened.” . . . I'm thinking, NO! It's not the best thing that's happened! I've been able to get some benefits from it, but NO! Are any of those benefits worth it? No! They are lessons I would have liked to have learned another way. . . . This is a very hard way. . . . I don't know if the value of life is worth that kind of terror to learn that lesson. . . . Nothing in my life was as bad or as scary as “This is not a cyst.”

Nothing is worth that, the terror of that day. But good things have come of it. It's wonderful to appreciate life. But it's not worth it!

As a final note, although for some women finding the positives out of a devastating illness is a crucial means of growth, coping, and maintenance of hope, not everyone finds solace in approaching suffering this way. Well-meaning friends and family members who are overly eager to encourage women with cancer to “think positively” may add to the frustration and isolation of women who have a healthy need to express their suffering and to have their losses validated. Hence, although it is encouraging to know that positive growth and benefits may be gained in response to great suffering, it is also important to be sensitive to the fact that the expectation that one should find positive meaning can impose an added burden upon people living with cancer.

References

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