

Palliative Care: Your Emotional and Spiritual Health

It's not easy for Angela Valerio to find time for herself. But when she does, she often turns to music.

"I listen to rap, and I listen to R&B sometimes - depends on my mood - maybe I could be a little emotional."

Angela has had to deal with a range of emotions since being diagnosed six years ago with a painful growth, called a Desmoid Tumor, in her right leg. Though not considered cancerous, cells from the tumor can invade the tissues around it. To prevent that, Angela has been on Chemotherapy, which has side effects like fatigue, nausea, and migraines. Her disease - and its treatment - take not just a physical toll, but also an emotional one.

"There's stress, there's depression, anxiety, sadness, um, loneliness."

"Now with the different medicines that you are taking what are you finding to be the most helpful?"

Angela is getting relief thanks to Palliative Care, specialized medical treatment designed to help patients and their families deal with the physical effects of living with a serious illness, as well as the emotional ones.

"We witness a myriad of common emotions and feelings in our patients who have been diagnosed with serious illness - everything from profound shock and dismay, to disbelief, to denial."

Some of the most common issues include: Anxiety; Depression; loneliness; Agitation - or restlessness that often shows up in behaviors like fidgeting, or pacing; Delirium - severe mental confusion that can lead to incoherence, memory problems, and hallucinations; Hopelessness; and sometimes even suicidal thoughts.

"We are here to support you and your actual family."

Palliative Care Teams include a social worker, who can provide emotional support and counseling for the patient and family. In addition to counseling, your Palliative Care Team may recommend measures including: medications; resuming some of your favorite activities, as much as possible; and socializing, to help avoid isolation and prevent loneliness; Music therapy; Art therapy; and complementary treatments, like meditation, and acupuncture.

"If we feel that our interventions, whether they be Medical interventions or Supportive Care interventions are not effective enough, then what we often do is we consult psychiatry."

Dealing with a serious illness can also bring up Spiritual challenges. You ask, "why is this happening - to me?" Or question your faith. The Palliative Care Team works with you to make sure your spiritual needs are met. In some cases, this may mean talking with a chaplain on the team, or a faith leader in your community.

"The role of chaplains is to really sit with a patient who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, and to see what impact that diagnosis, and the prognosis, has, on the meaning that they attach to who they are, and the meaning that they attach to the purpose of their life."

For some, the strength that comes from faith can be a powerful tool in coping with a serious illness.

"I do believe that you can't separate mind from body, and from spirit. So, it's really very important to reach out and ask for palliative care that addresses the whole self - mind, body, and spirit."

Palliative Care: Your Emotional and Spiritual Health

Angela is grateful that she's received just that from her team.

"They don't just only care about my physical pain, they also care about my emotional pain. My relationship with the team, it's great. It's more like a family."