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Coping with Cancer

When patients need more than medicine to get well

By RUTH ROVNER

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The people who attend Shari Baron's weekly support groups are a diverse mix: they are young and old, male and female, gay and straight, and with varying occupations. But they share a bond that is stronger than any difference.

That bond — an unwelcome one — is cancer. Each of them has been through the experience of hearing a diagnosis of cancer and facing all that happens after that stark news. Some are newly diagnosed. Others have been in treatment for months or even years, and still others have had a recurrence.

Whatever their individual situations, Baron knows that they need support that goes beyond medical care.

"We discuss everything — fears of the future, fear of pain or death, side effects of treatment, relationship issues," she says. "It's very wide-ranging, and

they really open up and talk about personal matters. This is a safe place to talk about the hard stuff."

That "safe place" is The Wellness Community of Philadelphia (TWCP), a non-profit organization that offers a wide array of programs for people with cancer. Its purpose is to help them enhance their health and well-being and restore hope. The programs include support groups, educational workshops, mind and body workshops and more.

Baron, a Havertown resident who's an authority on group psychotherapy and a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist, has more than 15 years of experience leading support groups at The Wellness Community. Her official title is clinical associate. She's also in private practice as a psychotherapist.

At the Wellness Community, which is headquartered in a homelike setting in West Fairmount Park, Baron runs two different groups each week for people with all types of cancer. The ages range from 24 to 75, and the cancers cover the gamut.

She also runs a monthly group specifically for women with gynecological cancers. "These women have specific issues related to body image, sexuality, and other issues that people with other types of cancer don't share," says Baron.

All the groups are intended for those who are in treatment for their cancer or



Clients at The Wellness Community of Philadelphia in West Fairmount Park.

who have recently finished. Because treatment times vary, some have been in a group for three or even four years.

Whatever their individual situations, they welcome the need to share emotions and concerns that are best understood by others with cancer. Sometimes even the most caring and supportive family and friends can't really help. "They just don't 'get it' the way someone with cancer does," says Baron.

For instance, one woman was recently faced with an unexpected blow. She had finished treatment for ovarian cancer, was told that she was fine and the cancer probably would not return. The group wished her well as she looked forward to starting her life anew.

"But then she found out she had a recurrence," relates Baron. "It was terrible news. And she was so grateful to get emotional support from the group. They were able to acknowledge her fears and some could share their own experiences with recurrence. They gave her the feeling, 'You're not alone. We're in this together.'"

Besides opening up to each other during group sessions, Baron's participants often give each other extra support outside of the sessions. They've accompanied

group members to doctors appointments or visited those who are in the hospital.

They are also there for each other if the cancer becomes terminal. In one recent instance, one group member whose cancer had progressed was at home under hospice care. Her fellow group members visited her regularly.

Others with end-stage cancer have continued to attend the group sessions until almost the end. One man with prostate cancer was a loyal group participant. "He came faithfully every week, even though he had end-stage cancer," says Baron. "And he was very open in discussing it."

One afternoon, he came to the group and was hospitalized the same day. Group members visited him there, and he died several days later.

He was not the only participant to succumb to cancer. "Everyone knows that people die of cancer," says Baron. "But far more people leave the group because they get better than because they die."

Still, when outsiders hear about her work, they'll often ask, "How do you do it? Isn't it depressing?"

"They assume that people with cancer are dying," says Baron. "But I'm working with people who are LIVING with cancer, and my job is to help them live fuller and

better lives with their cancer."

While some issues discussed in the groups are emotional or even spiritual, at other times the participants have very practical concerns — about when to call a doctor, or how to cope with side effects of chemotherapy. "We don't give medical advice," emphasizes Baron. "But members can encourage each other to get a second opinion, or to ask their doctors further questions. They can help each other because of their own experiences."

Baron herself has never had cancer, although several members of her immediate family are cancer survivors. And she knows the issues well not only as a psychiatric clinical nurse but through her long experience with support groups at the Wellness Community of Philadelphia.

She first became involved soon after it was founded in 1993. At the time she had a private psychotherapy practice — and still does. Because of her nursing background, her clients were often people with cancer and other diseases.

One client was a woman with breast cancer who had just joined the first support group at the Wellness Community, and spoke about it with enthusiasm.

"I thought, 'This sounds interesting,'" says Baron. "And by coincidence, they were looking for a therapist and called me." She went for an interview — and she's been committed to the organization ever since.

A certified group therapist as well as a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist, Baron has extensive training and experience. She's a recognized expert on the concerns facing cancer survivors and their families. She's written articles on this subject and is often invited to give presentations and lectures.

A past president of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, Baron has been in private practice in Delaware County for more than 25 years. She's active in group psychotherapy organizations and nursing groups. She also contributed two chapters to a recent publication about group therapy.

So she leads a busy life. And one of the highlights continues to be her work with cancer support groups at The Wellness Community.

"It's very satisfying to help people with cancer achieve their fullest potential," she says. "And I've grown personally from working with them. This disease changes their perspective on life. They look at the world differently. Minor irritations become unimportant. It's a different perspective on life, and I consider it a blessing to work with people who have that perspective."

For information on The Wellness Community of Philadelphia, call 215-879-7733 or visit Website www.twcp.org.