

## **Choices in Healing**

By Mark McClure, MD

As a physician who regularly counsels and treats patients with cancer, I'm always on the lookout for helpful resources to share with my patients. The result of over 10 years of research, *Choices in Healing* by Michael Lerner, Ph.D., is one such resource. Written for both the lay person and physician, this wonderful book is replete with useful information cancer patients and their physicians should know.

For example, in *Choices in Healing*, Lerner explains the difference between healing and curing. A cure, he explains, is a successful medical treatment--the complete absence of disease which allows a person who previously had cancer to live as long as he or she would have lived without cancer. A cure is what a doctor hopes to bring to a patient. Healing, on the other hand, is an inner process through which a person becomes whole. Healing takes place on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level. Although healing and curing are different, they are deeply entwined. Healing is a necessary part of curing. For any cure to work, the physical healing power must be sufficient to enable recovery to take place. Yet healing also takes place on deeper levels whether or not physical recovery occurs. Healing is actually attainment of peace of mind and can occur even when a cure is ultimately proven to be impossible.

Hope, according to Lerner, is another important ingredient needed for healing to occur. Patients who lose hope will not fight for their lives. Lerner states that cancer patients often experience themselves as losing all control of their lives, becoming passive objects of all kinds of decisions and treatments by their medical teams. According to his research, that they can participate in the fight for life with cancer--by working to enhance their own healing and recuperative resources--offers patients hope and is often a profoundly important discovery. Although this fight may not always result in life extension, Lerner points out that patients engaged in personal healing work can make a transformative difference in the quality of their lives. And hope, he believes, is a fundamental catalyst for this healing process to occur.

To begin their healing journey, as suggested by Larry Leshan, Ph.D. in his book *Cancer as a Turning Point*, Lerner suggests that cancer patients ask themselves the following three questions:

- If I could do (or be) absolutely anything in the world that I wanted for the rest of my life, what would I truly want to do (or be)?
- Since I have been diagnosed with cancer, what do I find has become important to me and what that previously seemed important do I discover I am ready to let go?
- Within the circumstances of the cancer diagnosis, what would I optimally choose in every area of my current life? What kind of mainstream and complementary therapies should I undertake? What kind of relationships? What kind of work? What forms of relaxation or meditation? What forms of exercise or recreation? What kind of diet? What rhythms of daily life? What studies or activities? What kinds of support and response do I want from family and friends? What are some of the unique things--very personal to me--that would give me special delight and healthy pleasure each day?

Lerner also characterizes how certain behaviors can positively affect healing and survival. For example, research has shown that cancer survivors:

- don't take 'no' for an answer
- actively search for help
- seek out others who have been healed from their type of cancer
- form constructive partnerships with health professionals
- don't hesitate to make radical life changes

- regard illness as a gift, as a turning point in their lives
- find a purpose in life
- cultivate self-acceptance
- avoid constant thoughts about undesirable developments
- cultivate a balanced optimism.

Patients confronted with cancer require and deserve more from their doctors than just surgery, chemotherapy or radiation. Patients require the type of information contained in the book *Choices in Healing*. I believe that it should be required reading for any physician treating patients with cancer and useful reading for the same patient population.