



The classic cycle of stress for patients with major disease. A variety of forms of complementary therapies, which patients can choose and combine according to their needs, can help to ameliorate this distress.

# Good Counsel and Complementary Therapies for Periods of High Patient Stress

For physicians, meeting with a patient or family member to share difficult news about a major disease condition often brings medicine’s most difficult moments. The level of fear, denial, anger, sadness and altered self-image that such news understandably generates in patients can rise to intense levels.

But by serving as good counselors and staying at the ready with broad, inclusive resources, doctors and other healthcare providers can play a critical role in helping patients through these periods, explained Lourdes medical oncologist **Eduardo Fernandez, MD**, at the fifth annual Explorations in Integrative Medicine program, held in March by the Lourdes Wellness Center. Dr. Fernandez, who is on staff at Lourdes Medical Center of Burlington County, described the increasingly important role integrative or complementary medicine plays for this purpose.

“Almost everyone has to deal with difficult medical news at some point in their lives. But stress is not always our enemy. The objective is to gain mastery over it,” said Dr. Fernandez, in his presentation “Coping with Cancer-Related Stress.”

## Importance of Physician Demeanor

In cancer and other conditions, the body’s natural controls have broken down. Using the analogy, Dr. Fernandez — one of a panel of experts addressing this year’s program theme “Integrative Approaches to Managing Stress” — noted that patients must acknowledge, likewise, loss of control over their lives when fighting major disease.

“In cancer care, usually the surgeon or the internist breaks the news, but the oncologist may later have to explain that a treatment has not worked. In any critical meeting about a major disease condition, patient and family will take

comfort if the doctor remains confident about and in command of the information. An unhurried and empathetic demeanor is also essential,” said Dr. Fernandez, who additionally noted the importance of using less-frightening terminology whenever possible.

But even with the best communication, some patients may refuse to acknowledge their status. Dr. Fernandez cited the example of the occasional patient who, on a second consult, claims to not have been informed that he or she has cancer, even while the accompanying family member confirms that indeed he or she had. He pointed to complementary therapies as a way to help patients relax and center, so that they can better understand and participate in their care (see sidebar).

## Family, Staff and Therapies

“It’s important to assess who’s around to help the patient, and to be vigilant for patients who turn away from family members in their distress,” noted Dr. Fernandez.

Second comes a process in which the patient becomes more comfortable with the care process and the medical staff. Dr. Fernandez acknowledged the essential listening function that health professionals such as nurses and technicians serve, and their role in offering compassion and gentle care.

Compounding the management challenge, though, some patients may think only of medication when it comes to tackling stress. Dr. Fernandez, who also serves as chair of the Biomedical Committee at the hospital, suggested that physicians have an obligation to review and help patients access alternative forms of care (see sidebar).

“A combination of behavior modification, empowerment, knowledge and integrative care creates the best chance for patients to keep their hopes high and to accept changes as they embrace new ways to cope,” he said.



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Dissuade patients from considering the illness “their fault” he recommended, and also make costs of care clear at each step along the way. And, to assuage patients’ fear of the toxicities or injury inherent in some forms of treatment, help them to understand that most patients come through treatment more smoothly than they initially believe they will.

### **Relief in Stress Periods**

Patients can also fall prey to stress in the period after completing care, when they feel they are no longer proactively dealing with their disease and no longer interacting with care providers. Continuity with complementary therapies can help during this stage.

“Some patients recover well from stress, while others never do,” observed Dr. Fernandez, a member of Burlington County Hematology-Oncology Associates, P.A. Noting

the importance for patients of reframing news about diseases, he added, “For now, we can’t cure cancer but we can move to a place where patients see it as a long-term condition, and where we help them react to it like they would to learning they have other chronic diseases.”

The spike in anxiety and depression that comes for patients at certain key junctures of care for cancer and other serious conditions lends itself well to a number of forms of nontraditional and complementary care, said the oncologist. His extensive experience in referring patients for reiki therapy,\* meditation and other forms of integrative medicine has made him a strong proponent of such resources.

\* Editor’s Note: Lourdes Health System does not offer reiki services in keeping with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops guidelines. Reiki services are available through the offices of Burlington County Hematology-Oncology Associates, P.A.

## **Beneficial Techniques for Patients**

At the conference, Dr. Fernandez reviewed these age-old “novel techniques to de-stress,” noting:

- **Massage:** “The informed therapist will know how to adjust massage to the patient’s needs, for very little discomfort. Concerned patients should also know that no evidence supports the notion that massage can spread cancer.”
- **Acupuncture:** “Useful for treating a range of physical symptoms. Good evidence of immunologic benefits as well.”
- **Yoga:** “A very versatile therapy that is effective in countering anxiety.”
- **Meditation:** “Also widely applicable for quieting the anxious mind.”
- **Hypnosis:** “Many myths and misconceptions surround this approach, which actually serves to create a heightened state of concentration, so that suggestions can reach the subconscious and alter recurring thoughts that interrupt the normal thought process.”
- **Reiki therapy:** “In addition to whatever other benefits the patient receives, this is a very relaxing experience.”



### **CONTACT**

The **Lourdes Wellness Center** offers physicians free prescription pads to select integrative options for patients. For a supply or to learn more about the Lourdes Wellness Center, call 856-869-3125. For more information or to refer a patient to a Lourdes medical oncologist, call 1-888-LOURDES (568-7337).