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Becky Johnson's Cancer Support Groups Advocate HOPE

With two groups of women, Becky Johnson facilitates discussions to discover how current and former cancer patients cope with their diagnosis, treatment and feelings. In two-hour meetings twice a month, the goal is to bring back hope. Cancer brings stress and worry, and finding others in similar situations brings comfort. Johnson finds that after people get into a group and get to know each other, they become "free."

"At this eve of surgery, you don't want to go back to anything superficial. You just want to stay there," says Johnson. The cancer patients have strong emotions to get power over.

"Fear is so big," says Johnson. "After I had two of my own breast biopsies done, I realized I had never known so much fear." This experience, coupled with the death of her mother to breast cancer when Johnson was twelve, helped her understand where cancer patients are coming from.

Johnson gained vision for starting her first support group through her experience as a colleague and the insight of a co-worker. The office manager had battled one round of breast cancer, but it came back in his breast. After completing a support group through the hospital, she shared with Johnson the feeling that it missed the personal, emotional and supportive communication in a home atmosphere, realizing it general at times the 7-minute ride can get overlooked.

Subsequently, Becky's first patient group grew to twelve women — people would discuss the group or meet during chemotherapy treatments and invite others to join. Johnson notes that she would like to see a greater depth of support for cancer patients. For example, when they have their chemo treatments, include people there to be a support. Johnson has



the utmost respect for the medical employees, but notes that they carry many responsibilities and sometimes have difficulty finding extra time to meet the personal needs of patients.

Because of this vision, Johnson has begun to work closely with the Therapeutic Healing Institute (THI) and Executive Director Tom Lake. Lake advocates the value of Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies including guided imagery, therapeutic touch, massage, heated stone therapy, and aromatherapy.

THI is a non-profit organization that provides therapeutic healing services at no charge for cancer patients of any age, gender, ethnicity, or economic background, whether chemotherapy and/or radiation.

is both personally rewarding and gratifying to be involved in the healing process of not only the patient, but also their families, loved ones, and caregivers," says Luke. Being in the field of health and wellness for over 20 years, he is a licensed certified Massage Therapist, an ABMP Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals member, and a licensed Aesthetician with focus on clinical and therapeutic healing skincare services.

With his board, Luke has worked to expand Theria's services and scope. One board member, Jonathan Weber, MA, PA-C, at Yale-New Haven Hospital, has helped in completing grant requests, noting research on the benefits of massage to cancer patients.

In one study, 35 patients were randomized to receive either up to nine 20-minute massages during inpatient stays or standard care. Massage was superior to standard care in reducing anxiety, nausea and fatigue and improving general well-being (Ahles, Tope, Finson).

Becky Johnson and Tom Luke hope to offer more by working together. For starters, new this year is Johnson's group of cancer survivors. This support group is for patients who are finished with chemotherapy and/or radiation treatments and are dealing with stress, anxiety, and the uncertainty of the future, Johnson believes. "Life is unpredictable but the purpose of this group is to teach you to embrace each moment and enjoy life to the fullest, once again."

"In the first support group, there was always a sense of fun,

even though it's heavy duty." With this group continuing for 3 to 5 years, Johnson notes frequent laughter and going beyond the cancer. "Cancer is only part of who they are. Through groups, people become cheerleaders for each other, and they give the support necessary to allow them to process through all the feelings," says Johnson.

Johnson has a practice at Knapp Counseling in Sioux Falls, and deals with depression, grief, marriage counseling, anxiety, divorce, step-parenting as well as self-esteem and family of origin issues. It is her experience that groups are not only healing, but they provide a powerful catalyst to change behaviors and outlooks that may be self-defeating. She strives to make each group a place where any feeling is safe to express, and in fact, believes that when people honestly express their feelings, that is when the healing can begin.

For herself, Johnson even found healing over her personal brush up with cancer. Hearing other cancer patients talk helped Johnson understand what her mother went through. Instead of looking through a child's eyes, she realized how brave her mother had to be without many of the current cancer treatments now offered.

"I used to not be able to talk about her without crying. Now I can."

And for Becky Johnson, she knows this support is what allows cancer patients to stop feeling paralyzed and move beyond the pain. 🍀

