FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES, clinical researchers have sought to establish a clear link between individuals’ emotional well-being and their survival of cancer. Several early studies provided evidence that the link was established and that psychotherapy and group support could extend the life span of treated groups when compared to control groups. More recently, however, three meta-analyses, several large clinical studies, and a large systematic review of the relevant literature have suggested otherwise. In fact, researchers James Coyne, Michael Stefanek, and Steven Palmer argue that the evidence is so weak it does not justify any further studies.

In an article in the *Psychological Bulletin* 133.3 (2007), they document that the methods used by investigators David Spiegel et al. (1989) and Fawzy I. Fawzy et al. (1993) did not adequately test the hypothesis that psychosocial support causes extended survival from cancer (although in both cases, the studies had not been designed to measure mortality as the primary outcome). Only after the study was completed did the researchers report what is called a “post hoc finding.” In the Fawzy study, for example, the claim was made that melanoma patients who received psychoeducational interventions had a sevenfold decrease in relative risk of death after six years. A closer look at the results showed that the removal of just one patient from the study nullified its statistical significance.

Why is this important? As Coyne and his colleagues note, such findings impact the types of treatment that cancer patients seek. The authors acknowledge that patients experience benefits from psychotherapy as a tool for coping with their disease but explain that many people measure the value of such psychosocial interventions on whether they extend survival rather than improve quality of life or reduce stress. Moreover, the researchers note: “If claims about the effects of psychotherapy on survival are advanced and then abandoned, it becomes an undignified retreat to claim importance of psychosocial interventions based on their ‘mere’ psychosocial benefits. An unwarranted strong claim could thus undercut the credibility of what has always been a reasonable claim.”

The authors consider another potential problem: the assumption that psychotherapy does not have negative effects. They point to several studies that have established the potential harm caused by psychotherapy, including declines in self-esteem and body image and increased preoccupation with cancer. “If nothing else,” they write, “attendance of weekly sessions for a year or more . . . places considerable demands on ill and dying patients that are difficult to justify when therapy is sought with the expectation that it will prolong life.”

These concerns are well founded and must be considered as we keep looking for ways to combat cancer and harness our natural healing capacities. However, the results of these analyses and studies do not refute the psychotherapy experiences of those who have recovered from cancer. Mainstream science aims to establish laws and generalizations about large populations. Statistical analyses often assume and require a normally distributed sample that excludes people who are outside the normal bell curve. This works to answer one set of questions, but not another. What can we learn from the “outliers”—those lucky folks who have something to tell us about the exception to the rule?
This question has been the driving force for IONS Spontaneous Remission Program over the last twenty years (www.noetic.org/research/sr/main.html). In one qualitative study (Killoran, Schlitz, and Lewis, 2002), we interviewed 17 people who were still alive 20 years after a Stage IV diagnosis of metastatic cancer. We observed that nearly all the participants in our sample had characterized this typically traumatic news as “unremarkable”; traumatic for most people, the bad news had apparently provided little plot change to their life stories. Through a detailed life-history analysis, we noted that such traditional North American cultural values as intention, positive thinking, and individuation, which all have the capacity to help overcome adversity, appear to bolster the belief that we can control our health and even resist a recurrence of cancer.

While the data for rejecting the efficacy of psycho-social intervention for the average population is strong, the outliers in these studies should nonetheless be examined with all possible resources. Indeed, our own study of long-term survivors may offer important insights into why psychotherapy has not been proven to provide survival benefits: Dwelling too much on the cancer experience, for example, may disrupt the cultural value of individual will and self-reliance.


Marilyn Mandala Schlitz is vice president of research and education at IONS and a coauthor of Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life (Noetic Books/ New Harbinger, 2008).

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

Compiled by Marc Kaufman and Cindy Kuzma

Loopy Photons Clarify Quantum “Spookiness”
Researchers at the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the Joint Quantum Institute have found a new way to test fundamental concepts in quantum theory. The scientists developed a new method for creating pairs of entangled photons—particles of light whose properties are interlinked in very unusual ways, dictated by the rules of quantum physics. They devised an experiment in which a pulse of light is sent into both ends of a twisted loop of optical fiber. Pairs of photons of the same color traveling in either direction will, every so often, interact in a process known as “four-wave mixing,” converting into two new entangled photons—one that is redder and the other that is bluer than the originals.