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FROM PATIENT TO RESPANT

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Unfortunately, doctors and health professionals, in general, do not study *success*. We are far more likely to consider an unexpected recovery to be due to treatment or a 'spontaneous remission.' However, I have learned from my experience with these patients – by asking them, “Why didn't you die when you were supposed to?” – that they always have a story to tell. As an intern, I can recall realizing that the seniors with hip fractures who were noisy and demanding didn't develop pneumonia and die, while those submissive and quiet seniors who never raised their voice or caused a problem had a much higher mortality rate.

By speaking up and becoming a character or problem patient, you become identified as a person and not by your room number or disease, and are therefore far less likely to have a fatal or non-fatal medical error made during your care. The word *patient* derives its meaning from Middle English, referring to a submissive sufferer. That is not a good thing to be when hospitalized or receiving medical treatment of any kind. You need to be a *respant*—a term I coined to designate a 'responsible participant' – if you want to heal and survive (Siegel, 2002).

These days, we know from studies how one's emotions and personality affect survival rates. Years ago, I was criticized when speaking about many things that are now considered scientific. No one had researched these, because no one believed they made sense. Simple things like the effect of laughter on the survival of cancer respants, and the effect of loneliness on the genes which control immune function, are now proven by research studies to be true. The fact that women live longer than men with the same cancers, or that married men live longer than single men with the same cancers, is not about the therapeutic influence of female hormones, or about men sleeping with female hormones, but about relationships and meaning in people's lives. Survival behavior and an immune-competent personality are not accidental or merely luck.

Because of what they observe in their patients, those in the mental health field are far more likely to be aware of the self-healing potentials that many people can activate. People will always do better than expected when they have a sense of meaning in their life, express anger and emotions appropriately in defense of themselves, ask for help from family and friends, participate in their health care decisions, say no to that which they choose not to do, find time to do what they enjoy and to play, use their feelings to help them to heal their lives and do not live a role but an authentic life. I would add that spiritual faith, and not seeing disease as punishment from God also plays a role, as well as the desire and intention to survive. Disease is a loss of health, not a punishment. Your health is to be sought after as you would seek to find your lost car keys.

In my surgical practice, I found that a large part of the problem was that people were afraid to take responsibility and participate in their self-care. They feared that if they didn't get well it would mean they were a failure.

Decades ago, I invited one hundred cancer patients to attend a support group and live a longer, better life. I expected them to bring friends and family members and that I would have hundreds of people to deal with. Less than a dozen women showed up for the first meeting. I realized that I did not know the people I was caring for. I had misunderstood their will to live. If you do not grow up with parents who love you and give you models and mottos to live by, and if you never have teachers, clergy, and other authority figures who love and respect you, then you are likely to fall into guilt, shame, blame, addictions, and self-destructive behavior.

Those who showed up for the support group became labeled 'exceptional' cancer patients. Although they represent a minority in the population of people who have cancer, they reveal to us our potential. Difficult patients do not die when they are supposed to. Statistics do not determine their outcome or results. Those who choose to be respants, with inspiration to transform their lives and rebirth themselves, give their bodies the message to live. The body then does the best it can for them.

Our body loves us but if we do not love our life and our body it sees illness and death as a way to be free of our afflictions. The greater incidence of serious medical problems on Monday mornings supports my observations. There are more heart attacks, strokes, illnesses and suicides on Monday mornings than at any other time in the week. People's bodies respond to their despair at having to turn up for work that their mind, emotions and spirit are saying they should really stop doing.

When you let an MD – many of whom seem to believe these letters stand for Medical Deity – determine whether you live or die, you are giving away your power. I have seen patients who had their hope taken away by doctors. They committed suicide, or went home, climbed into bed, and died. I have also seen respants get damn angry at their doctors and go on to survive for many years, or even be cured of their disease.

How to be a respant

You have to start with a belief in yourself and have faith in all the things you incorporate into your life and choose to be your therapy. I know people who have left their troubles to God and been cured of cancer. A respant of mine, who was a landscaper, after surgery refused treatment for his cancer because it was springtime and he wanted to go home and make the world beautiful before he died. He lived to be ninety-four and became one of my many teachers.

The mind is indeed a powerful thing. Its power is not emphasized enough in the medical information we receive during medical school training. We do not receive a true medical education; it does not contain tools to help people with their life experiences. Our education is focused on diseases and on prescribing for them. We do not ask people, "How may I help you?" but rather "What is your chief complaint?" and then we prescribe for them without knowing their life story and why they might be sick at that time.

The mind and body are a unit and communicate with each other. I have yet to meet a medical student who has been told how Carl Jung interpreted a dream, thereby correctly diagnosing a brain tumor. I have had the same experience using dreams and drawings by respants to help me guide them to the proper diagnosis and treatment. When respants become empowered, they do not just respond from their intellect, but use their intuition, too.

There are times people do not want chemotherapy and yet draw a beautiful picture of it, while others who are receiving it draw the devil giving them poison. It is not hard to know who will have more side effects. When you are patiently submissive and let others prescribe for you, you are in trouble. One young woman refused further treatment. When she drew a picture for me, she labeled herself as bald, ugly, and horrible.

The cancer is crying "Help me!" because it is going through the same hell she is. She is sticking a spear in her doctor because of what his treatment did to her.

I know a young fellow who had a high-powered water gun in his hospital room. Whenever anyone intruded upon his privacy, he drenched them. The nurses and intern respected him for it, and when he died his water gun became a gift to empower other children.

I created a Siegel Kit for all hospitalized patients. It includes a water gun, noisemaker, magic marker, and 'vital signs.' The water gun I've explained. The magic marker is so that anyone going to the operating room can write "cut here" on one side and "not this one, stupid" on the other. The noisemaker is to get attention when you need it. To quote several respants, "You are guaranteed an hour of uninterrupted silence if you push the call button." I know a woman who would be dead today if she hadn't had a roommate who went for help when no one responded to her call while she was choking on aspirated food.

The most helpful vital signs do not show your pulse, blood pressure, temperature, and respiratory rate – they show your needs and desires. These are signs you hang on your hospital room door or over your bed telling people what your needs are and how you want to be treated.

I also recommend hanging your baby pictures on your hospital walls. So when people ask who the cute kid is, you answer, "It's me."

Lastly, as a respant, you must also choose therapy you believe in. If there are any conflicts between the treatments and the way you would like your body to respond, you can reprogram your mind and body by using guided imagery.

I know of a case in which the radioactive material was not replaced in a radiation therapy machine after its repair. So for one month, people were not being treated, and yet the radiation therapist did not know this – until a routine inspection of his machine a month later. He was telling me how terrible he felt about not treating anyone for a month. I said, "You'd have to be an idiot not to know you weren't treating anyone. So people obviously had side effects, and their tumors were shrinking because they thought they were being treated." His response was "Oh my God, you're right."

In summary

I work hard to deceive people into health by working with their beliefs and communicating with them in a positive way, instead of listing all the side effects they will have and none of the advantages of therapy. Doctors need training in communication and hypnotic techniques.

Wordswordswords can become *swordwordswords*. We can kill or cure with words or scalpels. That is why people need to be respants and keep their power and feel free to change doctors and criticize them in constructive ways. The best doctors are criticized by patients, nurses, and family. Why? Because they do not make excuses, and learn from their mistakes.

Believe me. If your doctors or their loved ones have suffered a major illness, they remain no longer a spectator or tourist. They now become a native. Understanding the experience, they become a much better health care provider.

So become a respant! Love yourself, take responsibility for and participate in your life and state of health. This is not about avoiding dying, but about living, and its beneficial side effects.

Reference

Siegel, B. Respants: Information, Inspiration and Expiration. *International J of Healing and Caring* 2002, 2(1), 1-5.

Bernie Siegel, MD, who prefers to be called Bernie, not Dr. Siegel, was born in Brooklyn, NY. He attended Colgate University and Cornell University Medical College. He holds membership in two scholastic honor societies, Phi Beta Kappa and Alpha Omega Alpha and graduated with honors. His surgical training took place at Yale New Haven Hospital, West Haven Veteran's Hospital and the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. He retired from practice as an assistant clinical professor of surgery at Yale of general and pediatric surgery in 1989 to speak to patients and their caregivers.

In 1978 he originated Exceptional Cancer Patients, a specific form of individual and group therapy utilizing patients' drawings, dreams, images and feelings. ECaP is based on "carefrontation," a safe, loving therapeutic confrontation, which facilitates personal lifestyle changes, personal empowerment and healing of the individual's life. The physical, spiritual and psychological benefits which followed led to his desire to make everyone aware of his or her healing potential. He realized exceptional behavior is what we are all capable of.

Bernie, and his wife and coworker Bobbie, live in a suburb of New Haven, Connecticut. They have five children and eight grandchildren. Bernie and Bobbie have co-authored their children, books and articles. Their home with its many children, pets and interests resembled a cross between a family art gallery, museum, zoo and automobile repair shop. It still resembles these things, although the children are trying to improve its appearance in order to avoid embarrassment.

In 1986 his first book, *Love, Medicine & Miracles* was published. This event redirected his life. In 1989 *Peace, Love & Healing* and in 1993 *How To Live Between Office Visits* followed. He is currently working on other books with the goal of humanizing medical education and medical care, as well as, empowering patients and teaching survival behavior to enhance immune system competency. Bernie's realization that we all need help dealing with the difficulties of life, not just the physical ones, led to Bernie writing his fourth book in 1998 *Prescriptions for Living*. It helps people to become aware of the eternal truths and wisdom of the sages through Bernie's stories and insights rather than wait a personal disaster. He wants to help people fix their lives before they are broken, and thus not have to become strong at the broken places. Published in 2003 are *Help Me To Heal* to empower patients and their caregivers and *365 Prescriptions For The Soul*, in 2004 a children's book about how difficulties can become blessings, *Smudge Bunny*, in 2005 *101 Exercises For The Soul* and out in the Fall of 2006 a prescriptions for parenting book *Love, Magic & Mud Pies*. Published in 2008 *Buddy's Candle*, for children of all ages, related to dealing with the loss of a loved one, be it a pet or parent, and to be published in 2009 *Faith, Hope & Healing* with survivor stories and my reflections about what they teach us. His web site is www.BernieSiegelMD.com.

Woody Allen once said, "If I had one wish it would be to be somebody else." Bernie's wish was to be a few inches taller. His work has been such a growth experience that he is now a few inches taller. His prediction is that in the next decade the role of consciousness, spirituality, non-local healing, body memory and heart energy will all be explored as scientific subjects.

For many, Bernie needs no introduction. He has touched many lives all over our planet. In 1978 he began talking about patient empowerment and the choice to live fully and die in peace. As a physician, who has cared for and counseled innumerable people who's mortality has been threatened by an illness, Bernie embraces a philosophy of living and dying that stands at the forefront of the medical ethics and spiritual issues our society grapples with today. He continues to assist in the breaking of new ground in the field of healing and personally struggling to live the message of kindness and love.

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