

GRACE

an interview with Dr. Arash Asher,
Chaplain Bronwen Jones, and Dr. Jeffrey Wertheimer

Many that have experienced a cancer diagnosis are intimately familiar with the associated feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. In Magnolia House's Growing Resiliency and Courage (GRACE) Program, participants learn tools to manage the emotional, physical and spiritual challenges of a diagnosis. With the spread of COVID-19, we are in a time where these emotions are prevailing for many of us and we could all benefit from the tools provided in GRACE. We spoke to the GRACE team, Dr. Arash Asher, Chaplain Bronwen Jones, and Dr. Jeffrey Wertheimer, to explore these topics further.



Q. As a team, you run one of Tower's most loved programs GRACE- Growing Resiliency and Courage. How have the themes of GRACE translated to these uncertain times we are living in?

Dr. Asher- I think that virtually all the themes of the GRACE program speak to the circumstances we're all facing now: the impacts of social isolation (and how to try to mitigate this), the value of managing perspective in an authentic but empowering way, and strategies to manage fear and the unknown. These are not cancer issues but life issues that most of us have been forced to contend with over the last six months. As I often say to my co-facilitators, I sometimes feel I am running the GRACE group as much for me as I am for the service of our patients. Despite having worked to develop these concepts and materials, I need the reminders of these themes and values and ideals, too.

Dr. Wertheimer- The pillars of GRACE, inclusive of "insight and wisdom," "hope and meaning," "purpose and gratitude," "connectivity and humor," "strength and courage," and "perseverance and blessings," speak to some of the core tenets of living with resilience. While we pursue a focus on safety and stability during these current times, the themes of the GRACE program are a reminder to access adaptive coping techniques, connect with others and our authentic selves, find meaning in our circumstances, and attend to the blessings in our lives, in contrast to a consuming focus on the challenging times and current tragedies.

Chaplain Jones- Many people I visit as a chaplain are wearily living through years of different treatment regimens after initially starting with a warrior-like spirit to combat the disease. Similarly, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was much talk and expression of the heroism to go out and combat the virus, but now, after months of living in an altered lifestyle, people are tired of living this way, feeling spiritually fatigued. The meaning and desire for life, although still there, is more on the back-burner, waiting. Although we do not have control over disease, we can choose to nurture and feed our spirit.

Q. In your work and in GRACE, you speak about the health effects of loneliness. Now that so many of us have been and continue to be staying mostly in our homes and with limited social interaction, how are you seeing this manifest in those you work with?

Dr. Asher- In my opinion, the impact can be devastating for some. It breaks my heart to have seen some individuals who were recently diagnosed and had to go through even their first chemotherapy sessions and the like without a loved one present. Then we have to be mindful that many of us are living alone, with a "pod" to help lessen the feelings of loneliness. I've had some patients describe this loneliness as an ache, a desire for human connection and intimacy that is heartbreaking. On the other hand, I will admit that I've met some people who describe themselves as introverts, who actually are enjoying the time not being forced into excessive daily social interactions and to have the time to reflect inward more than before. It's just a reminder that we need to consider our personal temperament and needs and there's almost never a one size fits all solution.

Dr. Wertheimer - The chronic feelings of loneliness – different from being alone – can have negative effects on physical and

mental health, such as, but not limited to, increased stress, depression and anxiety, poor sleep, cognitive difficulties, reduced engagement in self-care (e.g., poor diet, reduced exercise), and increased risk for illness (e.g., cardiovascular disease and infections).

In the day-to-day experiences in the workplace, reduced socialization and feelings of disconnectedness are taking a visible toll on individuals both for patients and healthcare workers. Fatigue, diminished energy, emotional strain (e.g., irritability, diminished frustration tolerance, and increased stress and anxiety) are seemingly commonplace. Recommended coping behaviors as it relates to loneliness have included staying connected in some form (e.g., creatively; technologically) – connecting with others who have similar interests such as virtual book clubs, craft making clubs, yoga, etc.; engaging in a form of community services (while maintaining safety precautions); managing perspective and other resilient behaviors; meeting with a mental health professional; among other strategies.

Chaplain Jones- I see many different responses to COVID and its effect on people's loneliness. Those who live alone are more isolated than ever, especially if they are not near family, or have no family. And there is fear and concern as to how to get help if there is a crisis. But, on the other hand, I have seen some family relationships heal during this time, creating less loneliness. And there is another story. People whose way of being is to be swamped with social obligations all the time now find that they have time to reflect and take a step back from the busy-ness of life. For them, it is a change-maker and they do not want to return to being constantly hosting. And then there are the parents with young children at home whose loneliness is not physical or social, but internal, stretched to the limit of constant parenting, where self-care feels even more impossible. That's a tough one.

Q. I think almost all of us have heard about the benefits of mindfulness. To those that are new to mindfulness practices, what are some ways to integrate this into your daily routine? What research based evidence can you point to that supports the benefits of mindfulness?

Dr. Wertheimer- To speak to mindfulness practices, it is worthwhile to define mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present-centered, being aware of what we are doing and what we are experiencing in a non-judgmental way. Mindfulness brings the opportunity to increase awareness of our present sensory experiences. Notably, while meditation is a form of mindfulness, mindfulness does not have to be in the form of meditation. Mindfulness can take many forms from attending to your breath, to listening to music, to sitting in nature, to eating mindfully, to walking mindfully.

Research on the health-benefits has been burgeoning in recent years. Suffice it to say, mindfulness has been found to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and pain (physical and emotional) and improve sleep, cognitive functioning, compassion and empathy, and an overall sense of resilience.

As for cultivating mindfulness into our daily routine, one does not want to "force" mindfulness into their lives. Rather, finding meaningful and enjoyable activities that create the space for mindfulness is key to creating the daily habits of mindful living. Without oversimplifying it, integrating mindfulness into our daily life requires deliberate moments to pause and "be"—to be a "human being" as opposed to a "human doing." The good news is that research has found that even a few minutes (i.e., 5-10 minutes) of

mindfulness a day can have significant health benefits. For beginners, don't give up too soon. Recommendations for consistent application of mindfulness for 3 to 4 weeks will help instill a sense of routine and will help yield benefit.

Q. When talking about the importance of physical activity in this time, you've addressed the ABCs of COVID training. Can you tell us a little more about the benefits of physical exercise on the mind and body at this time? Do you have suggestions on how one can determine the best type of physical activities?

Dr. Asher- In the exercise physiology world, there's often the question of "What is the best exercise"? As you may have guessed, the best exercise is probably the exercise you are most likely to stick with consistently over time. But as far as COVID goes, my guess is that it would probably be most important (if I had to choose) to focus on moderate aerobic exercise (think brisk walking, bicycle riding, elliptical machine, swimming, etc). There is some evidence that very high intensity, long duration exercise (think very long distance running) may actually stress the immune system, at least temporarily. So it is probably not the best form of exercise in my opinion.

There's an interesting study involving rats that I think is revealing: a genetically identical group of rats were separated into 2 groups. One group was kept fit by allowing the rats to exercise on their wheel as much as they liked. The other identical group had their environment be the same except they were deprived of exercise by removing the wheel. The investigators then exposed each group to a major "stressor" (in this case, the rats endured being plunged into cold water....which I can imagine is quite stressful). Then they analyzed the brains of each group of rats. The investigators learned that the group of rats that were "fit" had a markedly less negative response in the hippocampus (a part of the brain involved in the memory circuit but also known to be negatively impacted by stress) compared to the group of rats who were 'couch' potatoes. So, while I don't think it's the entire solution, I do believe exercise and maintaining fitness as best as possible, is part of the secret sauce in trying to maintain resiliency.

There's also some very preliminary evidence that breathing in through your nose, which can increase nitric oxide levels, can be supportive to our immune function, in addition to having other health benefits. So I agree that nasal breathing (something discussed often in many yoga practices) is a good skill to develop.

Q. In a recent educational lecture you addressed spiritual fatigue—something many of us experienced but perhaps have not been able to name. Do you have suggestions on how to confront feelings around spiritual fatigue or burnout?

Chaplain Jones- I see spiritual fatigue as being addressed by nurturing one's spiritual resources. There are the resources that are based on activities that lift the spirit, such as reading, gardening, being with children, playing with your pet, fly fishing, orchids, hamsters, soup, dirt biking, butterflies, poetry, puzzles, mysteries, rumba, punk, stargazing, Chevy El Camino, NBA, scuba diving, baking, silverware, dolls, bonsai. And there is also the spiritual resource that comes from nurturing your personal values in life, the things that identify you as a human being. They can be such things as the pursuit of knowledge, caring for elders, respecting self/others, deep relationships, honesty, caring for the planet, advocating for

animals, leading religious communities, and/or being a mensch.

Q. Let's talk about humor, a theme you return to in GRACE and that you have researched extensively. Can you address some of the health benefits of laughter and humor?

Dr. Asher- Humor helps keep perspective probably more than anything else. A number of studies have demonstrated that cortisol and stress hormones are reduced when we can perceive daily events and occurrences through some lens of humor. That's probably why people who can laugh seem to have better immune systems and perhaps even better longevity. Legend Carl Reiner said, "Keep laughing. You'll live forever". I don't know if it's true, but he did live to age 98.

Dr. Wertheimer- Laughter and humor have both physiological and psychological health benefits. Research has found that humor and laughter can decrease stress-related hormones and reduce anxiety, pain and tension; laughter is good for the psyche and the respiratory, cardiovascular, and immune systems. Despite its clear benefits, some have found that humorous moments are elusive, difficult to access depending on one's present state, and understandably so. In the GRACE curriculum, we heed Dr. Viktor Frankl's premise, that even if humor seems difficult to find in certain contexts, we have the ability to "manufacture" or "invent" humorous moments. We have heard marvelous perspectives about how our GRACE attendees have found or even created humor in their journey with cancer.

Chaplain Jones- Humor is brilliant at shooting one's perspective up and beyond the earthly experience and seeing the absurdity of life, our selves, each other. It is hard to imagine life without humor. Humor lifts you out of spiritual fatigue, gives you a short break from the seriousness of life, frees you from fear, even if just for a moment.

Q. What is one thing that you are seeing that is making you hopeful right now?

Dr. Asher- I think and talk a lot about perspective; both in GRACE and at home with my family. But I think it's really a hard skill to cultivate because we only know what we know. This is why I think the power of story-telling historically has been so important.... because it helps us learn from an older generation and see the world through the eyes of others who have experienced life over time and learned some pearls of wisdom that can be passed on.

One thing I see is that everyone's perspective has shifted. When this passes, I believe we'll pay attention to the things that matter more and that we'll be less likely to take so much that we have for granted. At least for a while. The key will be to try not to lose these insights over time.

Dr. Wertheimer- In the broad scope of today's challenges, the presence of kindness, compassion, inspiration, gratitude, and resilience is visible, palpable even, throughout our community.

Chaplain Jones- People slowing down to reflect on life, relying on their own ability to learn what is important for them in life.