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# Reviews and Recent Publications of Interest

## Feelings of Hope and Courage

*Childhood Cancer and the Family: The Challenge of Stressors and Support* by Mark A. Chesler and Oscar A. Barbarin. (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987. \$30.)

Johanna Shapiro

The book *Childhood Cancer and the Family* represents the culmination of many years of careful research and investigation by its authors. It is wide-ranging in scope, and that breadth of vision is perhaps the overarching message of the book: that childhood cancer is a disease not only of children but of parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, and neighbors—indeed of entire communities.

This assumption informs the structure of the book as well. The authors focus on those affected by childhood cancer using an interactive model of stress, coping, and support. Thus, the initial chapters provide an excellent and insightful summary of the various types of stressors inherent in the experience of childhood cancer, including medical, personal, and social stressors. Later chapters skillfully differentiate

between coping on the part of the child, the parents, and the family as a whole. They also examine the critical but complex role of social support in its diverse manifestations.

*Childhood Cancer* appears to contain all of the insights and findings relevant to family coping with chronic illness:

- Most families cope fairly well with the devastating experience of childhood cancer.
- Siblings are prone to feelings of guilt and resentment, as well as school and behavior problems.
- The patients themselves are often stigmatized by peers, but overall remain psychologically normal.
- Open communication within the family unit and between the family and medical staff is critical to maintaining the family's emotional equilibrium.

The book also debunks certain still-prevalent myths:

- Marriages may be strained but usually *are not* broken by the experience of having a child with cancer.

- Friends, relatives, and medical staff, as well as the patient's immediate family, *do need* support and catharsis.
- Single parents *do not* necessarily experience more stress than do two-parent families.
- Efforts to support the cancer patient and his or her family *may be* problematic, especially when they are empty gestures or platitudes.
- Normalcy does not mean going back to the way things were, but taking the risk to create new ways of living.

### Positive Coping

Unfortunately, the more complex dimensions of stress, coping, and support often remain hidden, unelucidated, and implicit. For example, this book doesn't shed any new light on the somewhat tautological concept of *positive*, or *adaptive*, coping. Is there really such a thing or, as the authors assert, is coping purely in the eyes of the beholder—or, as they put it, in the eyes of the coper?

It is somewhat unclear in the mind of the reader as to when it is *appropriate* to engage in denial and when to ventilate pent-up feelings; when it is adaptive to draw closer to one's spouse and when it is better to withdraw; when one should seek information and when emotional solace. The subjective nature of coping is a point well worth making, one which previously has been submerged in excessive theorizing and biased research assumptions.

However, without understanding in more depth the function and meaning of the vast array of coping strategies presented to the individuals and families who use them, it is easy to conclude pragmatically vis-à-vis coping, "Whatever works!" I think our insights in this area can become a good deal more sophisticated.

It is also not clear how social support affects coping strategies: Does it mediate stress or buffer it?

Finally, while it is useful to attempt to link specific coping strategies and sources of support with particular stressors (that is, information-seeking is the most direct way to cope with intellectual stressors), this process at times degenerates into self-evident or unnecessarily limiting conclusions. Surely, of course, clergy and philosophers may (or may not!) provide support during periods of existential confusion and uncertainty, as the authors recommend; but so also may family members, friends, nurses, and even the child himself or herself, although these individuals may not fit so neatly into this category.

### Honest Answers

However, these are really minor quibbles with a truly masterful work, which raises every question about childhood cancer, from the trivial to the sublime. The answers provided are honest, thoughtful, and frequently profound.

Ambitiously, *Childhood Cancer and the Family* aims at a dual audience: health professionals working in the area of pediatric oncology, and families of child cancer patients. The authors are generally successful in maintaining the balance in tone necessary to satisfy both groups. The book has a great deal of extremely practical information regarding interaction with health care professionals, school systems, and parent support groups. From a more academic perspective, the book also contains extensive chapter notes and informative summary tables, as well as an exhaustive appendix that provides more scholarly detail about methods of inquiry and findings.

The methodology itself is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative endeavors. Because of the relatively small number of families studied (fifty-five), the authors tend to avoid complex statistical analyses. Such restraint is both appropriate and admirable. However, it leaves a mass of correlational data, which can be frustrating to interpret.

Possibly for this reason, I found the qualitative narrative portions included in the text to be the more compelling sources in terms of

truly penetrating the multifaceted realities of childhood cancer. Listening to the voices of parents, teachers, friends, siblings, and the children themselves provides a moving and at times passionate glimpse into the phenomenology of childhood cancer.

These voices also provide some sage advice, applicable not only to learning to live well with cancer but also simply to learning to live well. As one adolescent puts it, "You will soon overcome the pain, and when the pain dies, so do many of the possible feelings of death and dying. In its place come strong feelings of hope, courage, and feelings for others who are also struggling."

These are words of wisdom for us all, health care workers, researchers, and parents alike.

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## Recent Publications of Interest

### **The Empathic Imagination.**

Alfred Margulies. New York: Norton, 1989. \$22.95.

### **Exercise Can Beat Your Arthritis.**

Valerie Sayce and Ian Fraser. Garden City Park, NY: Avery Publishing Group, 1989. \$9.95, paper.

### **Family Systems in Medicine.**

Christian N. Ramsey, Jr., editor. New York: Guilford, 1989. \$50.00.

### **The Healing Power of Humor.**

Allen Klein (foreword by O. Carl Simonton, M.D.). Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989. \$9.95, paper.

### **Healthy Aging: New Directions in Health, Biology, and Medicine.**

Joseph Bonner and William Harris. Claremont, CA: Hunter House, Inc., 1989. \$17.95.

### **Life Events and Illness.**

George W. Brown and Tirril O. Harris, editors. New York: Guilford Press, 1989. \$50.00.

### **Mindfulness.**

Ellen J. Langer. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1989. \$16.95.

### **Moments of Engagement: Intimate Psychotherapy in a Technological Age.**

Peter D. Kramer. New York: Norton, 1989. \$24.95.

### **Patterns of Distress: Emotional Insults and Human Form.**

Stanley Keleman. Berkeley, CA: Center Press, 1989. \$9.00, paper.

### **Seasonal Affective Disorders and Phototherapy.**

Norman E. Rosenthal and Mary C. Blehar, editors. New York: Guilford, 1989. \$45.00.

### **The Stress-Free Habit: Powerful Techniques for Health and Longevity.**

John M. Perkins. Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1989. \$6.95, paper.

### **Trauma in the Lives of Children: Crisis and Stress Management Techniques.**

Kendall Johnson. Claremont, CA: Hunter House, Inc., 1989. \$12.95, paper.

### **You the Healer.**

José Silva and Robert B. Stone. Tiburon, CA: H.J. Kramer, 1989. \$10.95, paper.