



Opinion piece/letter to the editor From Dr Ian Gawler OAM
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A team of Melbourne researchers have concluded that psychological responses to breast cancer might not improve a patient's chance of survival.

The findings by Prof. Kelly-Anne Phillips and colleagues were presented recently at the 2008 American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Annual Meeting and may prompt some to conclude that positive thinking does not help someone to deal with cancer.

As one cancer patient whose story epitomises so called 'positive thinking' I am aghast at the headline in Monday's paper.

Positive thinking was an integral part of my recovery from secondary bone cancer and since establishing The Gawler Foundation in 1983, I have had contact with thousands of people who have benefited from this same approach.

I am aghast because such a headline in my view is not justified by the research it was based upon and aghast because such a headline may well disempower people with cancer and lead to worse outcomes.

The research and subsequent headlines were based on an observational study. There was no control group, no intervention.

Those involved in the study were only assessed at a median of 11 months post diagnosis.

What this research shows is that specific psychological factors (anxiety, depression, emotional control, adjustment and social support) measured at a single point after diagnosis, had little correlation with survival many years later.

To extrapolate from this research that positive thinking does not help fight cancer is extraordinary.

I have just spent the day with a group of 39 people with cancer and we discussed healthy emotions, how to deal with blame and shame, overcoming guilt and practicing forgiveness; all as a prelude to what some call positive thinking. At The Gawler Foundation, we refer to it as mind training. We encourage people to be authentic with their emotions and we support the expression of so-called positive and negative emotions.

We do not advocate that people 'pretend' to be happy, nor that they deny difficult emotions, but we have observed that those who generally maintain a more positive approach are often happier and better able to handle the challenges their cancer presents.

The findings from this recent research highlight the confusion between false positivity and authentic positive thinking.

False positivity is when people believe they have to suppress difficult emotions like fear, doubt, sadness, grief and appear buoyant and cheerful all the time.

Authentic positive thinking or mind training involves acknowledging these same emotions with no judgment, finding a safe forum in which to express these and then doing something about the difficulties.

Mind training involves learning how the mind works and then using it intelligently. It involves things like cognitive behavioural therapy, developing healthy emotions, learning to communicate better, learning to set goals and to follow them through. It involves meditating to calm the mind so that it thinks more clearly and makes good decisions.

It also teaches how to deal with setbacks and disappointment. One of its key goals is actually an enduring peace of mind, a state of mind that is independent of outcome.

There's a big difference between wishful thinking and mind training.

Wishful thinking is where you hope for the best and do nothing about it. People may be lucky and get what they want, however more often than not wishful thinking leads to disappointment, shame and blame.

Mind training is *real* positive thinking. It involves hoping for the best and doing a lot about it.

The mind decides what you do. Authentic positive thinking leads to and relies for its benefit upon effective action.

To really test if positive thinking works it needs to be researched in line with what outcomes it produces.

Phillips' observational study does not do this. What is needed is a study that involves a randomised control group where half the people are taught mind training skills. Then we could study what each group does and how well they survive. That study would come much closer to testing if positive thinking works or not.

It is hard to think of a field of human endeavour where the mind does not influence outcome.

Business, sport, relationships, creativity – all are heavily affected by the state of our mind. Why would cancer be different?

From my many years of experience working with thousands of people affected by cancer, the conclusion is clear. The mind plays a major role in influencing quality of life and survival.

I know many long term survivors who are certain that learning to use their mind, training their mind, was pivotal in their survival.

Surely what is needed is a well designed study that examines this question. A study that does include a control group and an intervention.

In the interim, I would urge people affected by cancer not to be misled or disempowered by the conclusions drawn by this new research. Learn how to use your mind and feel the benefits.

The mind affects what choices we make. The mind is connected to the body and affects how it functions, how it heals.

The mind can bring despair or happiness. Many believe that the mind can lead to longer cancer survival.

Let us research that proposition properly.

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The Gawler Foundation is committed to an integrated approach to health, healing and wellbeing that includes the body, emotions, mind and spirit.

Our mission is to work within an integrative medical framework to provide access to the best possible instruction and support for the implementation of self-help techniques for people experiencing cancer, MS or other serious illness.

We aim to support each person to seek their own inner truth, to realise it and to live by it.