Speaker 1:

‎The Cancer Assist Show, hosted by Dr. Bill Evans and brought to you by The Cancer Assistance Program. Help, when you really need it.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Hello, I'm Dr. Bill Evans and welcome to this third podcast on cancer and COVID-19. In our previous two podcasts on this topic, I've talked a lot about the risk to cancer patients of being exposed to the Coronavirus and the importance of following the Health Canada directions of keeping a safe distance, six feet or two meters, washing your hands frequently, cleaning surfaces, particularly your cell phone, doorknobs and any horizontal surface. And generally, just trying to keep active in your home if you're isolated, as you should be, eating well.

Dr. Bill Evans:

And this is an opportunity too, to stop smoking and vaping because we know those things lower your immunity, place you at more risk to COVID-19, that also irritates your airways and make the more susceptible to the virus. But today we're going to be talking with Dr. Karen Zhang about your emotions, both in terms of when you receive a diagnosis of cancer, what those emotions are and how to cope with them, but as well, in the context of this pandemic, how are those emotions changed and how should we react to them? So I'm going to welcome Dr. Karen Zhang to the podcast today.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Thank you so much, Dr. Evans and CAP for having me here. I'm very excited to speak on this topic.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Oh, well, welcome. And why don't you tell us a little bit about your background? How did you get to be a clinical psychologist working here at Hamilton at the JCC?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Sure enough. So my undergraduate degree was in psychology at Queen's University, and I just so happened to encounter a professor there, who did research on pain and the psychology around the pain. And I became to realize that our emotions' not just a singular thing, that it can be tied to our health. So from there, I became very interested in idea of health psychology. That's the idea of how do we cope when we have a medical condition such as pain, cancer or even cardiac conditions. So I did my clinical psychology degree at a Western University. So I did my master's and my PhD in the area of clinical health psychology. And I was really looking at how do I kind of help people who have a medical condition cope with their illness and also adjust in their day-to-day lives, so then I did a residency.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Long story short, I was matched to St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, and that's when I first landed in Hamilton and fell in love with the city and the community that was here. And again, my role was really to support people from the idea of getting a transplant, to being inpatient, to having any sort of chronic disease, whether it's COPD, diabetes and the list goes on. Then I did a kind of fellowship, a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, where I worked primarily with cardiac patients. And when I saw that there were opportunities in Hamilton for me to work in a bariatric clinic, I kind of jumped back to Hamiltons, I like the city so much. And then eventually, there was something that really caught my attention, that was at the JCC was looking to set up a service called the Psychosocial Oncology Program, which is really about providing support to patients and family members. So I thought this was a great opportunity to use my skill set and something that I'm very passionate in. So that's how I landed at the JCC.

Dr. Bill Evans:

That's wonderful and I'm sure you're a huge asset to the JCC and to its patients. And it's interesting your comments about Hamilton and why you're attracted to the city. I feel much the same way that it's a city where people really care about each other and pull together, as we are now in facing this COVID-19 pandemic. Now, getting a diagnosis of cancer has a lot of emotional response to it, doesn't it? And even before COVID-19, there are lots of issues that cancer patients face. Maybe you could just talk a bit about the range of emotions that you see in cancer patients when they first get a diagnosis.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

I really like how you use that word, range, Dr. Evans, because that's exactly what it is. That is that individuals often have very different responses to the diagnosis. I think probably the most common responses include, the idea that they feel quite shocked, they can't believe that they have the diagnosis of cancer. A lot of uncertainty and fear about what's ahead and not knowing the next step. Some may also feel a sense of grief or loss because they feel like they're not the person that they were before the diagnosis. And sometimes there can be a sense of gratitude or a sense of relief that finally, they know what's going on and there's a plan going forward. So it really is quite a range

Dr. Bill Evans:

And how you react to it varies too, doesn't it? To some extent, I guess it depends how you grew up and the values that were instilled in you when you were young, if you were taught to sort of grow up in stiff upper lip and be stoic, that's one way of responding. If you grew up in a kind of very supportive environment with a lot of friends and family who nurtured you, then maybe you seek the support of your family when you get a diagnosis of cancer. So I guess there's a range of responses that can occur even with these emotions you've described.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah, yeah, and I think it really depends on how the diagnosis came about and how we typically cope. I mean, some of us are doers. We tend to kind of ignore the problem and keep ourselves busy. So the idea of when there's a plan, we just kind of focus on what's next. And we don't really think about the diagnosis until we're maybe done the treatment, then it really hits us. For some of us, we experience that fear or the sadness right at the beginning, because maybe we have a loved one that we've seen go through cancer and getting that diagnosis reminds us of those difficult times. So it absolutely is tied to our own personal experiences, how we typically cope. There is no wrong way of coping. I think everyone varies. Some of us, like I said, seek support. Some of us prefer to kind of just keep it to ourselves and that's okay. I think we all deal with these things in our own ways.

Dr. Bill Evans:

As an oncologist, I think that seeing a patient newly in the clinic, oftentimes we're trying to provide them with a lot of information about the disease and the treatment and the side effects and their issues about what the expectations from the treatment will be. And I think patients often feel quite overwhelmed with all that information and unable to process it immediately. And so there's sort of a need to have supports with them, an extra set of ears to take any information, but also time to process the information and maybe opportunities to rediscuss it subsequent visits.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

I absolutely do see people at various stages in their journeys. So some people feel like they need more support at the beginning when they're just getting the diagnosis and they feel so in the dark, but actually a lot of people I see when they're about just after the treatment or even years after their treatment, because they finally hit them what they went through and the shock of everything. So, absolutely, I think there's time that's needed to digest the information and also just the events that are occurring.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Right. And I guess, I'm certainly seeing this occasionally, not that commonly, I find most people seem to accept a diagnosis of cancer, but some people are very angry about it. "Why me? This shouldn't happen to me. I've lived well, I've exercised, I've eaten the right foods. I didn't smoke, blah, blah." And then they're very angry that this has happened. And that's another kind of reaction from time to time.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

And I think that's a very good point. And I think when we think about... sometimes, people feel quite angry because it's not just the cancer diagnosis that they're faced with. Oftentimes, I'm encountered people where they may have had several losses in the family and then on top of everything, they have to deal with a cancer diagnosis. And it does come down to this idea, why did this happen to me? What did I do wrong? And those feelings can be really difficult to tolerate because it's hard to answer those questions, why the string of bad events happen?

Dr. Bill Evans:

Exactly. I guess probably one of the commonest things I would say I saw was just sort of sadness to receive a diagnosis of cancer. People, I think, who are not in the oncology field, think that it must be a very depressing field because everybody must be depressed when they get a diagnosis. I didn't see that, I was actually inspired by most of my patients, but occasionally, there was a seriously depressed patient, but I can't imagine anybody, celebrating a diagnosis of cancer, as utterly it's sad, at the very least, to receive a diagnosis because it's a life threat. You don't know what the future holds initially.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

I think where I might see the most sadness is when people feel that having cancer or the treatment of cancer has really changed the person that they feel they are. So for example, some people might be the person that fixes everything around the house and the person that all the family members and friends kind of lean on. And the idea of having cancer, all of a sudden, everyone's kind of walking around eggshells around them and because of their low energy, they can't do all the things that they used to. And that really changes the sense of who they see themselves as, or they used to be a really good problem solver. And because of chemo brain, they can't really remember things.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Right.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

So that absolutely can bring a sense of sadness. Even if they've never been depressed before, the cancer can change who they are or their sense of themselves.

Dr. Bill Evans:

One of the reactions I've seen and I've read about is just that, and you used the word already, gratitude, and it's hard to imagine. I'm sure many people listening will say, "How could I be grateful for receiving a diagnosis of cancer?" Perhaps not at the moment of receiving the diagnosis, but I think the stories I've heard about are individuals who've come through cancer and its treatment and then have re-evaluated their lives and decided what's truly important in their life and choose to live differently. The rat race and chasing after materialism and so on suddenly seems quite irrelevant after you've had the experience of cancer.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

And I think all of those things and also people finding that how people come through during times of hardship. So, some patients are very grateful for family members or even neighbors, the random acts of kindness, preparing meals, giving rides, the volunteers of the CAP program, that there's a program like this, where people are dedicating or volunteering their time to really help others. I think those are definitely times when people find gratitude. And sometimes I do encounter individuals who, they recognize that there are some people who've say they're more grateful, but sometimes we just can't find that gratitude. And that's okay because there are valid reasons for perhaps why we're angry or distressed and gratitude is not something we need to find. It comes, more naturally.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Yeah. So we've talked about a range of reactions and they're all normal, right?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah.

Dr. Bill Evans:

So if you're experiencing those as an individual, now, as a patient, don't beat yourself up because you're feeling sad or you're angry because it is a natural reaction to a diagnosis of cancer. But, there are issues around coping. We'll talk about that a bit in a few minutes, but I wanted to just talk about how, with that background, how does a pandemic affect it? How does that change or intensify the reaction? I don't know whether you're seeing this in the Cancer Center now, that the patients are reacting maybe differently, have greater concerns, more fear perhaps.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah. I think that's a very interesting question, Dr. Evans, because I think what we're seeing with the COVID pandemic is that how cancer patients are coping, again, varies. But what's interesting is the idea of coping with something that's really uncertain, the idea of coping with something that's poses as a threat to our health, that is something that every one who's received a cancer diagnosis has already coped with. So in some ways, cancer patients already know what it's like to go through something as scary as a pandemic because the diagnosis of cancer has already brought in all those feelings.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

So some of the patients that I talk with, they would say things like social isolating, feeling more withdrawn, they've already experienced all those emotions before. What's interesting now, is that the whole world is going through this. So in some ways we feel a little bit less alone. Whereas when you're going through a cancer diagnosis, you may feel that you're the only one or it's not normal. But absolutely, then there's that other layer of now, if you're going through chemotherapy, if you're going through treatment, you may be feeling more scared about being outside or worry even more about your health, because we don't know much about COVID or feeling like, are we doing enough to keep ourselves safe?

Dr. Bill Evans:

Yeah. And I talked in my previous podcast about in fact, there is evidence that people with cancer are more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. That if they were to be infected by it, that there's a greater risk that they will have a serious illness, perhaps end up in an ICU, even die from it. So it's really, really important during this peak of the pandemic, to self-isolate and to practice all the things we referenced at the very beginning of this podcast to stay safe, which means perhaps a greater degree of isolation than what they would have experienced, as just being diagnosed with cancer in the absence of this pandemic. So it must heighten a lot of the emotional response.

Dr. Bill Evans:

And hearing also that, if you watch television these day and who doesn't? It's a continuous bombardment of information about a Coronavirus all the time, and it's kind of overwhelming and there's very few good news stories at the moment that are coming out of it. So, one of the pieces of advice I've read is just to limit your time watching television right now, which is probably a pretty solid advice for all of us, let alone if you have a cancer diagnosis. But what are some of the other ways you're working with cancer patients at this time to help them cope with their emotional response to both the disease and the pandemic?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah, yeah, I think absolutely, that's right. The first and probably the most important part is recognizing how much exposure we're getting to the news. I mean, it's not a good idea to avoid all news together because we do need credible information. But I think recognizing why we're reading the news or listening to what's going on or even being on Facebook, is to understand that it's to help us feel prepared. And if we're no longer feeling that way, when we're watching the news, that probably means we're saturated. So definitely having a better intention about why we're listening to the news or getting information is good.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Other ways is related to what you mentioned, Dr. Evans, is about staying connected. It's more important, now than ever, to find different ways where we feel that sense of connection, whether it's through phoning family members or friends, more than we used to, Skyping. Are you doing virtual options to feel connected with others? I think those are important to schedule, just as important to schedule as we would for having tea or coffee with a friend. These kind of virtual visits are also very important.

Dr. Bill Evans:

So scheduling your life a bit helps and including scheduling and calls to your friends and family, even if you're isolated. What about things like relaxation and exercise? What do you think about those in terms of helping people with their emotions during this time?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah. I think we can't go wrong with feeling too relaxed, it's hard to get that these days. But I think we do have to put in an extra effort to try to get that sense of relaxation. And I think what's hard about the COVID-19 pandemic is, we may feel that our coping strategies are shrinking a little bit, whereas before, going for a nice long walk in the park, now that park is being closed off, that can be really difficult for people. So it's really about creating new routines as well, so it doesn't feel like we're just losing or feeling more constrained by what we can do. Building a sort of alternative relaxation strategies, so for example, the Wellwood website also has some really great strategies for meditation or relaxation. Something like taking deep breaths in the day really sounds simple, but it really can help relax the body. And setting other things, like a new routine, can add a sense of feeling like we can have some control or predictability in our day, during a time when things really feel unsettled.

Dr. Bill Evans:

And what if some of these, we'll call them simple actions, taking deep breaths at intervals, maybe getting out to walk in nature, enjoy that, they're just not working for you. You're still at a high state of anxiety, your heart's going rapidly. What then? It must be a place where they need to seek some counseling, get some advice from a healthcare professional.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Yeah. So people are starting to feel that way, I would say, for several days on end, that can mean that the anxiety or how we're feeling is taking a course of its own. And that's okay. That can often happen, especially during a pandemic. So there's a couple options. A lot of family physicians, their offices are still open and they're in touch. So being in touch with your family doctor, they may have some resources that would be available in terms of having someone to talk to. If you're a patient still at the JCC, the Psychosocial Oncology Program, we're still having our telephone visits or virtual visits. So it's a safe way to feel connected and have a professional connect to talk to. Because oftentimes, when you kind of say this out loud to someone who's not part of your life, it can feel very cathartic.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Those are great supports and it's great that they can access them at the JCC. What about one other stressor that's affecting a lot of people, is the financial concern? Now, we used to just think about it prior to the pandemic, as sort of the financial burden of some of the things that the healthcare system doesn't pick up. And I was also surprised to learn from a colleague at McMaster University, the business school who's been studying this, the average cost out of pocket, if you're a cancer patient, is around $1000 a month, which is quite substantial.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Wow.

Dr. Bill Evans:

And now with many people out of work and maybe your partner is out of work and maybe they were the sole bread winner, so to speak, in the home and you've got a malignancy. So there's financial stresses as well, does the Psychosocial Oncology Program and group at the JCC help in helping individuals address the financial issues in any way or directing them to people who can help them?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Absolutely. I think a lot of the practical needs that we have right now also feel like it's being threatened because of the pandemic. We have a great team of social workers that can help us navigate through some of the uncertainty around finances and planning. So through the Psychosocial Oncology Program, we do have social workers who can help with just connecting you with the government resources that may be available, helping you with filling out some of the paperwork or understanding the process for that, because it can be difficult to try to navigate through the system of paperwork when we're also dealing with other stressors.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Well, that's very helpful advice. We've covered a lot of ground. Do you think there's some things that you... sort of the last messages you'd like to tell patients or caregivers who are looking after someone at home?

Dr. Karen Zhang:

I think, sometimes, what's really important to recognize is, we often think we have to be positive or we just stay optimistic. That means we're coping well. And I just want to normalize that sometimes, it's okay to not be okay sometimes. And especially during the COVID pandemic or we're also dealing with on top of that, a cancer diagnosis, things can be stressful and it's okay to feel stressed during these times. And the best thing to do is to accept that these emotions come, but they also go away and we don't need to be positive all the time to mean that we're staying strong or that we're staying resilient.

Dr. Bill Evans:

Good to hear, a good, clean message there. So, we, at the Cancer Assistance Program, are aware of the needs of our cancer patients and are trying to do our best to help. In our next podcast, I'm going to actually talk to the executive director of the program, Debbie Logel Butler. And we'll talk about some of the things that we're doing, but I just want people to know from this podcast that there are things to support you emotionally, but the Cancer Assistance Program is going to be helping as well, by delivering personal care items that you might have otherwise come by the CAP office to get. And if there's a need for food, because you can't get out to a supermarket easily, we're prepared to try and support you to some degree with food as well. So those are the things we'll talk about in more detail with Debbie in our next podcast, but thank you for tuning in and thank you to Dr. Karen Zhang for all of her insights related to dealing with your emotions during cancer and our current pandemic.

Dr. Karen Zhang:

Thank You so much for having me here, Dr. Evans,

Speaker 1:

This has been ‎The Cancer Assist Show, brought to you by the Cancer Assistance Program.