

Choose Gratitude

BY KRISTA NELSON, MSW, LCSW, OSW-C, FAOSW



I want to start my second column by saying, “Thank you.” A strength and a reason I love ACCC is because we are a community of people caring for those with cancer and their families. I am

more aware than ever of all of the individuals, disciplines, and roles it takes to ensure that these patients and families have access to comprehensive cancer care services. Each of you is important, and I want to thank you for your efforts. As ACCC President, I am thrilled to represent all members of the multidisciplinary cancer care team—across all clinic sites.

Whether you provide care at an academic program, community cancer center, or physician practice, you have experienced great suffering this past year. *Burnout. Exhaustion. Fatigue. Stress.* These were the words most frequently used by your colleagues who participated in the ACCC *Trending Now in Cancer Care 2020* focus groups.

So, what can ACCC do to help?

On May 24, I held my first Coffee Chat with new ACCC Delegate Representatives from across the country. Not surprising, one theme that emerged during our informal conversation was an overall feeling of distress in cancer program leaders and staff. Though some hesitate to share this emotion in front of colleagues, as a clinician, I believe that we must acknowledge this grief before we can heal from the challenges of the past 12 months. One way to heal is to connect with others who shared the same experience and who have come out stronger on the other side.

Another key finding in ACCC’s *Trending Now in Cancer Care 2020* report is that cancer care staff showed great resilience during the global pandemic. From this resiliency came new ways of delivering care to patients, strategies to improve processes and workflows, and innovative ways to support colleagues. What better way to share these successes than during a virtual Coffee Chat

with other ACCC members? Sign up for the next one today by emailing lgardner@acc-cancer.org.


If a Coffee Chat is not your “cup of tea” (excuse the pun), then join me for a Mindfulness Meditation. To help members of the cancer care team better manage stress and improve their overall well-being, ACCC is developing a Mindfulness Meditation series that will start at the end of June and run throughout my tenure as ACCC President. For more information about these opportunities to connect personally with others in the ACCC community, log on to acc-cancer.org/home/learn/presidents-theme.

Personally, I have come to realize that the COVID-19 pandemic magnified my awareness of the community I have served over the past decades. Living with uncertainty became a lens that I looked through this past year. In an online support group for people with advanced cancer, one member shared that though they felt like others now had a sense of what it was like to live with uncertainty, they were also aware that eventually things would go back to normal for most people. For others, especially patients with cancer, when the threat of COVID-19 is over, the uncertainty remains.

Recently, I have been working with a young man who was told that there are limited options for him to fight his cancer. This patient has gone through two stem cell transplants; his providers have tried multiple treatments. Nothing has kept his cancer from returning. Watching this young man embrace the uncertainty of when he will die—knowing that his cancer will take his life—has been an honor for me. We can learn so much from the strength of those we serve.

I share his story because it is why we do what we do. We are present with people in their most vulnerable moments and witness not only the suffering but the joy that those individuals with cancer bring to everyone around them. We may not be able to “fix” their problems, but we celebrate their moments of happiness and offer support during the difficult times.

For me, looking for things to be grateful for is one of the ways that I cope during hard times. June is National Cancer Survivor Month and an opportunity to be grateful for and celebrate the nearly 17 million cancer survivors across the country. I am also grateful to you—my colleagues—for supporting these 17 million cancer survivors.

Join me and choose gratitude. It’s a wonderful and healthy place to be. 

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