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## Maintaining a Fighting Spirit

### **THE UTIMATE BATTLE**

By Brig. Gen. James H. Ramsden, U.S. Army retired

In April 1990, my life changed dramatically. After years of suffering from increasing lower back pain and spasms, I underwent a CAT scan and a MRI. The test results revealed the spread of malignant tumors in my bone marrow. I had multiple myeloma, a cancer in the leukemia family, with an average life expectancy of three more years. As with others diagnosed with cancer, I was devastated. I experienced the denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance that often accompany serious illness or grief.

Through this transition, I noticed that the experiences and challenges of military service, combined with medical treatment and other techniques, created powerful forces of healing.

Military service develops many attributes- self-discipline, planning, motivation and emphasis on mission accomplishment- that can be brought to bear on the treatment and healing process. Moreover, positive attitude and a firm determination not to allow setbacks help in selecting favorable courses of action. A vital tool I continue to use is the decision-making process taught at the Army's Command and General Staff College of analyzing advantages and disadvantages of each possible option. The option with the most important advantages and the least significant disadvantages is usually selected. I use this technique to decide on such issues as chemotherapy options, second opinions, relapse questions and maintenance treatments. Input from others certainly played a part in the decision-making process, but I was, and am, ultimately responsible for my own decisions.

Since I have now more than doubled the three years I was projected to live, let me share some other insights about the battle I have fought and continue to fight. I could not have overcome adversity without comprehensive medical, mental, physical and spiritual recover/healing programs.

**Medical.** State-of-the-art medical treatment, from competent doctors who truly believe in my ability to fight for my life, is essential. I frequently told doctors tht I believe in the possibilities of living, not the probabilities of dying. If a doctor told me I would be dead within so many months or years, I found another doctor. I also discovered that the larger medical centers usually employed more expert staff members who had access to better facilities and equipment for tests and treatment.

I underwent chemotherapy for 18 months followed by interferon injections for maintenance. The initial results were promising but, by later 1992, the cancer began to grow again. After much soul searching and use of the decision-making process, I opted for a 1993 autologous bone marrow transplant at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. Now, I am back on interferon and staying in partial remission.

**Mental.** The tough "can do" mental attitude I first developed as a U.S. Military cadet, then honed in airborne school, the 82nd Airborne Division and the 1st Cavalry Division n Vietnam, helped me fight initial depression and fear and motivated me to work on my recovery program everyday. I tried to live just for today - the past is gone and the future is unknown. In addition, family support and encouragement has contributed immensely to my positive attitude. My wife and our four adult

children have provided hope, courage, and love during many crucial times. Owning a pet to care for and love has also been a big boost.

My books on healing emphasize the essential nature of techniques such as visualization or mental imagery. "Love, Medicine and Miracles by Bernie Siegel discusses these techniques in great detail. After going through a daily relaxation exercise (see Herbert Benson's "The Relaxation Response"), the imagination is used to visualize the chemotherapy, radiation or drugs destroying the cancer and healing the damage to the body. The connection of mind and body (psychoneuroimmunology) is an often-discussed topic in articles and books on alternative medicine and is especially in keeping immune systems strong.

Reading books on maintaining a positive attitude helps me. I like what Siegel says about healing verses curing. We each can live a healed life one day at a time, and some can be cured of their illness for the rest of their time on earth. I also highly recommend "Anatomy of an Illness" by Norman Cousins, "Getting Well Again" by Carl Simonton and "Spontaneous Healing by Andrew Weil.

An important and effective healing activity is to regularly engage in a local support group for a particular illness. The American Cancer society has information on cancer groups. As a facilitator in such a group for five years, I can attest to the help they provide participants. They are not "poor me" groups, but upbeat, informative and humorous gatherings.

**Physical.** Those in the armed forces know the importance of physical factors in maintaining a healthy body. A daily routine of exercise, such as walking, running, swimming and bicycling - with a doctor's approval is beneficial. Exercise can greatly strengthen a body being attacked by disease. Other benefits can be gained by cutting back on fat, cholesterol and sodium, and eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. Vitamins and herbs can be useful supplements. Getting plenty of rest and taking several relaxation breaks during the day (even if it is just to do deep breathing exercises) enable a mind and body to relieve stress and worry.

**Spiritual.** Although it is sometimes unpopular to mention God, I firmly believe that a strong spiritual belief system is a major advantage in fighting serious illness. Regardless of preferences, faith in a higher power seems to strengthen resolve and provide hope and acceptance of a situation. Daily prayer and meditation improve conscious contact with this spiritual power. An excellent time to meditate is after relaxation and visual imagery exercises. Reading spiritual literature educates and keeps thoughts focused.

While a few people may blame God or feel God is punishing them with sickness, most intuitively know God wants only good for us. When problems or questions arise, we should accept the pain and try to grow from the experience. An excellent book on this topic is "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" by Harold Kushner.

Medical science continues to give more tools to battle cancer, heart disease and other serious illnesses. I hope I have given enlightenment on additional healing techniques. Proper diagnosis of the problem, taking responsibility for recovery and maintaining a positive attitude all help in finding solutions. Military service personnel have the added benefit of being able to use the training they have received, especially in decision-making and problem-solving areas. A well-planned mental, physical and spiritual recovery program can enhance the body's ability to heal.

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