

Lesson in coping

The dying focus on living

By CAROL MAHONEY

A positive attitude can extend a cancer patient's life for years, believes Joann Johnson, an enthusiastic member of Focus on Living.

Sponsored by the American Cancer Society, the self-help group brings together cancer patients and their family members to help them cope with the disease.

Mrs. Johnson learned she had leukemia five years ago. Since that time she has undergone chemotherapy and immunotherapy. She currently is in her seventh remission.

The Troy mother of three credits the self-help group with dispelling much of the "heavy, black cloud" which she said hangs over the heads of cancer patients.

"There are times I feel it saved my life," she said.

Helen Shaw, who underwent a mastectomy 12 years ago, now acts as volunteer hostess for the Birmingham Focus on Living group. She was instrumental in setting up the pilot group more than four years ago.

Ms. Shaw said she approached the American Cancer Society board members with the idea after reading about "Make Today Count" groups in other states. Although the name is different, Focus on Living is patterned after these groups, she said.

She approached the board at the request of a cancer patient who told her, "I want to talk to someone who is in the same boat and find out how they are coping."

THE GROUP meets regularly at 7:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday of the month at the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. It is led by a

nurse-moderator who answers medical questions participants may have.

In addition, patients undergoing treatment for cancer are given the opportunity to discuss their personal reactions, both psychological and physical.

Although depression is fairly common among cancer patients, Mrs. Johnson said "the group helps you deal with it."

She cited a time when she was going through a period of depression which lasted four months. After attending a Focus meeting where a psychologist discussed causes of depression, Mrs. Johnson said she was able to come out of it on her own.

Mrs. Johnson believes that thinking positively and setting goals has helped her to go into remission. When her illness was first diagnosed, her youngest child was 7. She set a goal then to survive until he was older and more able to do things for himself.

Now, she said, her goal is to see her children married and "to hold my grandchildren in my arms."

It is that kind of goal setting which is encouraged by the Focus on Living program.

MRS. JOHNSON described a typical meeting during which participants introduce themselves and identify whether they are a patient, family member or friend.

"When you look around, you can't tell who the patient is. Most of the time you are astounded," she said.

Ms. Shaw said each new participant seems to follow a pattern. They open up more, because they are in a



The decision made to try and keep her life as normal as possible, Joann Johnson added piano lessons to an already busy schedule that includes caring for her family and working.

group where their feelings can be understood.

"They really dominate."

The group tries to have guest speakers four or five times each year. To date those have included psychologists, oncologists, and more recently, a dietician.

"Nutrition is very important,"

Mrs. Shaw said. "When you are on chemotherapy you need higher protein to rebuild cells. You shouldn't eat junk foods."

Ms. Shaw added that nausea may accompany chemotherapy. Patients often don't want to eat, but it's important they do, she cautioned.

The group also encourages better doctor-patient communication. Ms. Shaw said that many times a new

patient will say, "My doctor doesn't tell me anything."

Some people tend to think of doctors as gods. They convince themselves they don't deserve the doctor's time, she said.

"You are paying for their services and they are there to help you," she said.

MRS. JOHNSON is inspired by the response of some patients to the disease.

"You see people that have so much courage. I leave the meeting having so much admiration for couples who have a rough road ahead," Mrs. Johnson said. Like many spouses of cancer patients, Mrs. Johnson attends meetings with her.



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