

WEB EXCLUSIVES

Bookshelf

BY KATHY LATOUR

When It's Cancer: The 10 Essential Steps to Follow After Your Diagnosis [Rodale Inc., 2006]

By Toni Bernay, PhD, and Saar Porrath, MD

When It's Cancer falls into that category of a great cancer book from the physician-survivor. Saar Porrath, MD, a radiation and breast oncologist who practiced in Los Angeles for more than 20 years, created individualized programs for each patient based on lifestyle, psychological history and hopes and dreams, much of which centered on the doctor-patient relationship.

It wasn't until he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of multiple myeloma that he put his ideas for a personal plan into a concrete form. Working with his wife, psychologist Toni Bernay, PhD, he created *When It's Cancer*.

Dr. Bernay assumed the role of her husband's personal advocate, which is the first of the 10 steps in the Personal Cancer Management System (PCMS) presented in the book. The steps are built, Dr. Bernay says, on three core principles: be proactive, be inclusive and get an advocate.

When Dr. Porrath died in 1999, Dr. Bernay continued with the book they had started, learning in the midst of it that she too would use the PCMS for her journey through head and neck cancer.

The book offers what many of the coping books have, but with one huge difference. Instead of just saying, "Communicate with your doctor," it asks you to identify your information-gathering style so you will know what kind of physician will be the best for you, while another section delves deeper into the "depend on family and friends" theme to identify why you may be isolating yourself from them. These self-assessment tools are found throughout the book, as are worksheets and checklists. It's a how-to-do-cancer book with specifics to help you get the best care and heal in the shortest time.

From Step 1, which is to take control, the book is filled with how to's and how not

to's. One of the things I like best about the book is that after giving advice on how to do something, Dr. Bernay explains possible reasons for not being able to do it. Charts and quizzes help you sort out feelings at a time when everything is crazy. And once you figure out what has to happen, a chart helps you decide who should do what.

Each chapter follows the same pattern with details as small as body language and looking someone in the eye when talking to them to larger issues of ways to engage and gain control. In each chapter there are stories of real people and how they handled—or didn't handle—a situation.

Various areas of the book focus on diagnosis, deciding on treatment, side effects and mind, body and spirit issues. Every chapter gives information, asks you about your ability to comprehend and respond to this information, and gives you tools to make it all work.

Later chapters look at what to do after treatment and encourage planning ahead—an area of great concern for all survivors but one that is seldom addressed in books. Dr. Bernay addresses legal and financial issues—something we all need help on. I even found myself copying the checklist of financial and insurance issues I should know. Other areas look at palliative care, hospice and end of life.

Drs. Porrath and Bernay don't force information on readers, but rather propose tools for success and help readers understand and overcome negative responses. I'm sure there were subtle changes while Dr. Bernay field tested the book during her cancer experience. The best news is that she used her own guide and is a cancer survivor today.