



# *Mindful Cancer Care*

Interview with Paula van Grieken Ferrer

**BY SHANNON MARTIN**

**P**aula van Grieken Ferrer is a Clinical Psychologist at Body & Soul – Medical Clinics. Paula is completing an advanced degree in psycho-oncology and has worked with many cancer patients and families in the USA and Spain. I found it helpful and comforting to learn more and be able to share this information, since so many of us are affected by cancer.

#### **WHAT IS PSYCHO-ONCOLOGY?**

Psycho-oncology is a field of interdisciplinary study and practice at the intersection of lifestyle, psychology, and oncology (cancer science).

Essentially, this medical specialty studies the relationships between psychosocial factors and disease (such as positive effects of a strong emotional support system on cancer's progression), in order to holistically help patients and their families deal with the physical, emotional, and practical issues at the various stages of their cancer illness.

#### **WHO NEEDS PSYCHO-ONCOLOGY TREATMENT?**

Cancer naturally causes feelings of vulnerability, fear, and sadness. This psychological suffering and unpleasant emotions are what we call distress. Working with a professional to deal with these feelings can soothe anxiety and stress, enabling both the patient and their support system to cope better with the disease.

Patients frequently state that they would like more resources for dealing with emotional stress - such as worries about the future. For many people, working with a professional can help them take a more active role in their treatment, thereby increasing a sense of control and hope. In some patients, distress can evolve into psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders. Patients with a history of emotional turmoil are especially vulnerable.

Family members are also treated in psycho-oncology as a vital part of the support system. They can have a profound effect on the patient's well-being and ability to fight cancer. So being helped to deal with their own anxiety, caregiver stress, and adjustment can positively affect the whole situation.

#### **WHEN SHOULD A PERSON WITH CANCER BE WORKING WITH A PSYCHOLOGIST?**

Psycho-oncology is useful in various stages of the process to address different issues, such as:

- Newly diagnosed: feelings of fear, anxiety, adjustment, and taking an active role in treatment, decision-making, and other practical concerns
- Active treatment: dealing with side effects, emotions, and pain management
- Post-treatment: readjustment, managing checkups, goals, identity changes, and integrating the experience into positive growth

#### **HOW DO PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM PSYCHO-ONCOLOGY?**

Increased quality of life through relaxation, improved daily functioning, better symptom management, more active participation in treatment, and reduced stress for the patient's support system. Studies indicate that good psychological adjustment may lead to better health outcomes. My mission is to accompany patients through the various stages of the disease, convey hope, support them and their families, and make them more aware of their healing process. You don't choose the disease, but you can choose how you deal with it!

#### **WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS PRACTICE IN SHANGHAI?**

Many expats choose to return home for cancer treatment. So, they may be dealing with a different set of circumstances in terms of logistics and decisions. People are often overwhelmed with the practical aspects and may not adequately deal with the emotions they're facing at that time.

I often work with expats who have completed treatment but are still worried about their future and goals. They are working through rebalancing their body functions and emotions and need positive reinforcement. Facing cancer often causes people to re-evaluate things in their lives. I help them embrace these changes and opportunities for personal growth, so that they can cherish the happy moments more than ever before. Facing cancer is more manageable with adequate help, especially when patients already have to cope with the challenging adjustments of living in Shanghai.

In many countries, psycho-oncology is integrated into the cancer treatment setting; doctors evaluate distress and refer for services. Here, most patients will self-refer. Knowing such services are available here can be a lifeline for someone newly diagnosed and may provide a feeling of security for those wishing to return to Shanghai after treatment. You and your loved ones don't need to face the fight against cancer alone. Look for an experienced professional to be your partner in improving daily life and maximizing the positive outcomes of your treatment.

*Paula van Grieken Ferrer offers services at Body & Soul's Downtown, Hongmei Road and Century Park clinics. She will be sharing more about psycho-oncology and general pain management on Body & Soul's blog (<http://tcm-shanghai.com>), which covers Shanghai health topics.*

*Shannon Martin relocated from the U.S. to Shanghai with her husband over two years ago. She does writing and marketing projects for several companies.*