

12 STEPS TOWARD A MEDICAL "MIRACLE"

If you or someone you love is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, here are the positive steps you can take to insure the best outcome possible. They don't add up to a guarantee, of course. There are no guarantees in medicine. But that's actually good news for people with a serious illness: Maybe you can't be absolutely certain that the best will happen, but you also can't be certain -- no matter what your doctor says -- that the worst will happen.

- ❑ **Take Control of Your Illness.** You may think you're helpless, but you're not. Take control of your life back with a combination of information and attitude. Be a part of every decision about your treatment. Resist the urge to leave it all in your doctor's hands.
- ❑ **Insist on Options.** Forget about second opinions. Look instead for second options. There are no absolutes in medicine, no inevitabilities. There are multiple solutions to every problem. You just have to find them. Don't be afraid of choices; embrace them.
- ❑ **Find the Right Doctor.** Not all doctors are created equal. When you're seriously ill, it's worth the extra effort to find the best one for your condition. It can make the difference, literally, between life and death.
- ❑ **Build A Partnership With Your Doctor.** A true partnership means there are special responsibilities on both sides. Your part is to be informed about your illness so you can ask questions -- you can never ask too many questions. Your doctor's part is to answer them all, fully and patiently.
- ❑ **Recognize That All Medical Decisions Are Trade-offs.** Again, there are no right answers. Every decision regarding medical treatments involves weighing costs against benefits. To strike the right balance for you (everybody's balance is different) get all the information you can, then look carefully inside yourself and decide what really matters.
- ❑ **Sustain A Claim to Life.** A good attitude -- call it optimism or "fighting spirit" or whatever -- isn't enough, no matter how positive. You have to do something. A will to live has to be accompanied by a commitment to living: join a support group, make plans, set goals; "renew your membership in life."
- ❑ **Find An Advocate (Or Be Your Own).** In a managed care environment, getting the best care can be a struggle. You can end up fighting your doctor as well as your illness. If you haven't got enough fight to go around, enlist an advocate to do the fighting for you.
- ❑ **Subdue The Enemy Within.** Sooner or later, you'll hear a voice question: "Why Me?" Learn to recognize self-pity and resist it. Questions whatever bothers you; don't let this one. Not now. Another feeling to resist: guilt. Yes, loved ones are going through hell, but it's not your fault.
- ❑ **Build A Support Network.** You absolutely cannot get through this alone. You have to depend on people. Family, friends, caregivers, support groups, strangers, it doesn't matter, as long as it's somebody. But don't expect more of people than is reasonable. Don't expect family or friends to change just because you're sick. Don't expect yourself to change.
- ❑ **Don't Let The Disease -- Or The Treatment -- Change Who You Are.** Don't let the "I'm Still Here!" syndrome get the better of you. Denial and surrender are bad, but survival at any cost is also dangerous, just in a different way. If the disease, or the treatment, changes who you are, then you've lost the battle anyway.
- ❑ **Know When To Draw The Line.** There's a line beyond which the price of survival is just too high, a line between what is worth fighting for, and what is not. Thresholds of pain vary, as well as thresholds of fear and uncertainty. Doctors often draw this line for patients; draw it for yourself.
- ❑ **Never Say Never.** Everybody reacts to disease differently. Every body reacts to drugs and treatment differently. Every doctor has had patients who defied all the medical textbooks and prognoses. They've all seen "hopeless" cases turn around. For all the advancements in medical knowledge, the human body remains wondrous strange-- and full of surprises.