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Just In Time For The Holidays: The Innovation Of Hope



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[Consumer Tech](#)

During Dr. Ben Corn's first days as an intern, one of the first patients he saw had just been diagnosed with brain metastases. "The patient and family wanted to explore options," he recalls. "I presented the clinical story to a senior physician. When I returned to the room with the professor, she did not make eye contact with the patient or console the panicking relatives by putting a hand on their shoulder. Instead, she announced: 'Ya got brain mets. We'll start the XRT treatment tomorrow.' Our medical team then abruptly departed the room because we had to see 'the next case.'"



"Patients are touched by doctors who speak the language of hope instead of Medicalese." GETTY

At that moment, the young intern, whose decision to pursue medicine was influenced by his father's passing from prostate cancer when he was only 11, realized that nothing had changed in the years since: "Physicians hadn't learned how to speak to patients. They knew nothing about the art of creating and sustaining hope." It was then when he knew that his true calling was to tackle the emotional consequences of cancer.

Years later, Dr. Corn, by then a distinguished oncologist, co-founded [Life's Door](#), together with his wife Dvora. The organization provides training and programmatic platforms that address the needs of those facing end-of-life and people suffering from life-threatening or chronic illness.

It's rather uncommon to understand "hope" as an innovative concept, yet according to Dr. Corn, that's precisely what the health system so desperately needs. Physicians, he realized, are simply exhausted. "It is impossible to describe the extent to which we are temporally constrained and yet expected to increase our throughput."

The Hope Theory

He points out another fundamental problem: "For years, physicians have not been trained to think beyond the diagnosis and therapeutic response. The medical establishment is only now beginning to reflect on the concept of illness. He adds, "It's also worth noting that physicians are usually over-achievers who succeed at almost everything they do. All of a sudden, in the real world of oncology, doctors need to confront failure. This is very sobering and many of us would rather dodge that phenomenon instead of immersing ourselves in it."

Years ago, Dr. Corn treated a 28-year-old patient who was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer and needed endocrine therapy. Her grandma survived the Holocaust as a little girl thanks to a family who adopted her and

gave her shelter, and, as a gesture of gratitude, she later adopted a child, who carried on this tradition as well. “My patient wanted to perpetuate that family tradition and therefore did not want to take the treatment due to its side effects, that could restrict her from adopting a child of her own. Even though the medicine gave her some chance of survival, the goal of life was not enough.”

When Dr. Corn decided to adopt psychologist Charles Richard Snyder's Hope Theory, a breakthrough was achieved. “We used it to remind her that unless she took her medicine for the full 5 years, she would not receive permission from the authorities to adopt a child. In other words, we set up a distant goal, beyond the cancer-related objectives, which was worth pursuing. Hope theory is a powerful tool, in part, because it makes the doctor get in touch with the values that the patient holds most dear. Once values and goals are aligned, hope can blossom.”



"We will continue to agitate for hopefulness." Life's Door GETTY

According to Snyder's theory, hope can be seen as the perceived ability to walk certain paths leading to a clear desired destination. It helps people stay motivated and must consist of both cognitive elements and affective elements.

Dr. Corn realized that this life-saving tool should be at physicians' disposal: "A physician needs to know the human being, not just the patient. Every person has a fascinating narrative that is worth listening to."

Although the concept of hopefulness once had an amorphous meaning, the term has acquired a rigorous definition in the scholarly literature thanks to the work of Professor Rick Snyder from the University of Kansas, who defined it as a cognitive, measurable, goal-directed construct. Within this model, having hope means having goals ("hoped-for ends or objectives"), agency, which is the energy or motivation to reach goals, and pathways, which are perceived routes and plans to achieve those goals.



"Patients obtain the treatments they seek, while staff members become more aware of the stress that ... [+] GETTY

Several scientists inspired by Snyder's work started applying his techniques to enhance hope among a variety of populations, including students failing in school, and men who suddenly found themselves unemployed, or even behind bars. "We are using the same approaches now and tailoring it to patients, family members and healthcare providers. In the past," Corn explains, "the theory was used to bring about a variety of behavioral changes. In the setting of cancer, we want to confront the goals that truly restore meaning and prevent existential angst. It's amazing to see how patients are touched by doctors who speak the language of hope instead of Medicaese."

Spreading Hope Across the World

Dr. Corn, who was born and raised in America and later immigrated to Israel, has been working to spread his special hope program across medical institutions. "In Israel, several medical centers have invited us to work with staff members, providing the tools and guidelines they need to tackle the personal dimension of illness." He points out that this is a win-win. Patients obtain the treatments they seek, while staff members become more aware of the stress that affects them in the hospital environment and can then engage in self-care, reducing burnout. "We take a very broad view of the term 'medical staff.' We're not just speaking about physicians and nurses. We want to reach the security guards and the orderlies who transport patients to the radiology department. It's amazing how many meaningful conversations are enabled en route to a CT scan by an orderly who has been even briefly trained in hope theory. The entire medical system is being taxed," he continues, "including those who carry out the less glamorous jobs and are not the subject of TV shows. Our tools are easy to teach and the medical staff members are eager to learn them. Once you know how to make someone more hopeful, change occurs quickly."

A short while ago, Johns Hopkins University, which was looking to incorporate hope enhancement tools, reached out to 'Life's Door'. "We studied physicians as well as patients with metastatic breast cancer and demonstrated that our workshop spikes hopefulness. The data were presented in 2019 and at the ASCO meeting and is expected to be published next year in the Journal of Clinical Oncology Practice."

Life's Door will soon launch Hopetimize - a digital hope enhancement platform that will transform the way people around the world confront life's challenges, and experience aging and illness. "We believe that hopefulness is contagious," Dr. Corn concludes. "Many have told me that I am "evangelical" about the whole thing. When it comes to the topic of spreading the gospel of hopefulness, I prefer to think of myself as "agitated." In other words, when I discuss the subject, I'm trying to be not only earnest but also excited. Since it's critical to arouse the feelings of patients and providers alike, we will continue to agitate for hopefulness."