

One Friend Can Make a Difference

Lori Hartwell

Most of us cringe a little when we think back on our awkward teenage years. We wanted so desperately to fit in and to be accepted

surprised. Having observed us both for years, they had witnessed similar traits and backgrounds. They agreed that we were probably a “perfect match.”

I encourage all health care professionals to think about which of their patients might “connect” and to provide opportunities for them to meet one another. Hope is a powerful medicine.

by our peers. Of course, this is all intensified if you’re living with chronic kidney disease. Being homeschooled, I rarely had any interaction with other teens, and when I did, I had a tough time relating. Looking back, I realize that I talked mostly about my illness—not the best icebreaker. I seldom got the chance to meet kids who were living with the same illness. I desperately wanted to connect but didn’t quite know how.

A Perfect Match

In my late teens, at one of my routine blood transfusions, I met a girl named Gloria. She was in the bed next to mine. Like me, Gloria had run the gamut with her illness. During the next couple of hours, we shared our stories with a quiet understanding, with laughter and tears. I felt connected. Finally, someone understood where I had been and, more importantly, where I was going—the challenges I would face. Gloria shared strategies, wisdom, and a joy-for-life attitude that helped her navigate her illness. She became my mentor and confidant.

And to think, if we had not been simultaneously scheduled for blood transfusions, I would not have met this lifelong friend. She helped me learn how to process my feelings better than any trained therapist. Serendipity at work!

When I shared this story with my healthcare professionals, they weren’t



Lori Hartwell

Make Connections

In today’s health system, privacy is paramount, and, certainly, healthcare professionals must respect that. But I wonder how many other patients could benefit from a Gloria.

I encourage all healthcare professionals to think about which of their patients might “connect” and to provide opportunities for them to meet one another. Hope is a powerful medicine. In fact, a recent Duke University study showed that optimistic patients may survive longer because they tend to take better care of themselves. They are more likely to take their medications as prescribed and to follow doctors’ orders.¹ An understanding peer can truly be the best medicine.

As the president and founder of the Renal Support Network, I know that what Gloria taught me is manifested in our activities, helping fellow patients connect through the variety of programs we offer. When you have a serious illness, one friend can make the difference. I know that one friend made a difference in my life. **D&T**

The author is founder and president of the Renal Support Network. She is the author of “Chronically Happy: Joyful Living in Spite of Chronic Illness.”

Reference

1. Available at: <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/health&id=6018492>. Last accessed June 18, 2008.