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Measuring the Magic of Healing

While researchers wrestle to define and capture “healing,” its power continues to mend hearts and souls
—if not always bodies

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By Liwanag Ojala on February 21, 2018



Credit: Peter Cade Getty Images

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Three years into a brain cancer diagnosis that has an average survival rate of 18 months, Michael Bischoff of Minneapolis continues to heal. The 47-year-old husband and dad hopes for a cure, and for a long life. But with little control over the outcome of glioblastoma multiforme, the same cancer U.S. Sen. John McCain is fighting, Michael's main focus is on finding wholeness in each moment. Simply put: He has chosen to heal.

Michael considers what he loves the most—sitting beside the Mississippi River, biking in every kind of weather (yes, he wears a helmet), and settling into the sofa with his family—to be as important to his healing process as surgery, chemo and radiation. “Even if I die tomorrow,” Michael said, “I still want to celebrate miraculous healing today.”

As CEO of CaringBridge, the global nonprofit social network for families immersed in medical journeys, I am a constant witness to healing, in its miraculous, and ordinary, forms. Our team watches, in awe, all the ways in which families become whole again, after diagnosis, illness, injury, premature birth ... every health crisis imaginable. And some that are unimaginable. Through the online journal posts of patients and family caregivers, and the support from loved ones in response, we see that healing happens. And we believe it has value. Healing enables families to move ahead, regardless of health outcome, with what remains.

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But what exactly does healing look like? Especially when cure or restored health is not an outcome. To delve into this complex topic, we had expected to share stories like Michael's, and many more, within a framework that also addressed the science of healing—hoping for a surround-sound of actionable research to inspire families to choose healing. But it became clear that little empirical research exists on the topic of healing. For an explanation, we turned to Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, and director of the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota.

Kreitzer said, simply, “There is no universal definition of healing.” And without sufficient conceptual precision on what mending of the heart and soul looks like, versus physical healing, it is difficult to set a research agenda. As a scientist, Kreitzer said this is frustrating. But as a nurse, she defines healing as “wholeness ... an integration of body, mind and spirit.” In this broader context, there has been some evidence-based

measurement. For example, a qualitative study published in 2017 confirms that moving from being wounded, through suffering, to healing, is possible. In his book, *How Healing Works*, Wayne Jonas, executive director of Samueli Integrative Health Programs, explores the science of healing, and reports that 80 percent of healing happens organically, through mind-body connections.

Expecting that more research will inspire more families to believe that healing is possible, and valuable, CaringBridge has teamed with a compassionate-technology research collaborative at the University of Minnesota. The group includes researchers from the College of Computer Science and Engineering, the School of Nursing and the Center for Spirituality & Healing. Through analysis of 50 million online journal entries—the names and personally identifiable information have been removed from the data set—the hope is to capture evidence of the benefits of healing. Our goal is to help turn on its head a famous quote often attributed to Einstein: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

In the meantime, there are the stories. And the wisdom of healing shared by families like Michael’s and chronicled in the Web series “How We Heal”:

- A young widow changed careers to become an oncology nurse after losing her husband, a two-time Olympic athlete, to brain cancer at age 35. She said that helping others has helped her heal.
- Driving country roads in his Chevy pickup helped heal a young man who suffered “heart attack of the mind,” and attempted to take his life. He said he will always be working toward having depression control less of his life, but getting behind the wheel of his truck again, when doctors didn’t think it could happen, has made him whole again.
- During treatment for breast cancer, a 24-year-old woman sat at the piano in the church where she works and played her heart out, late at night, with only God as her audience. She said that singing and being able to worship brought her healing and peace.
- A Gulf War veteran who lost an eye to melanoma tapes to a backdrop in his garage a target with the word “c-a-n-c-e-r” written in ink. Then he takes aim with his Airsoft Machine Gun. As he opens fire, he says, “You ain’t got me, man, I got you.” Killing cancer has helped him heal.

Patients and family caregivers like these, who have been to hell and back, are evidence that healing is possible, even when it seems improbable. From what we observed in the field, healing looks different for everyone, and its definition may always be elusive. But its magic is worth measuring, so that everyone in need of healing may believe it is within their power.

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