

Study says faithful opt for aggressive treatment: Surprising results

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Two years ago, Kevin Brumett was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was 29 and had never smoked. After an initial round of successful treatment, the cancer spread to his brain. Still, Brumett is determined to fight the disease and says God is on his side at every step. He hopes his fight can help others who share his condition. "It's not right that people get cancer," says Brumett, from Newton, Massachusetts. "God is giving me the strength to fight this as hard and as long as I possibly can."

Cancer fighters such as Brumett, who employ faith in their battle against the deadly disease, are often able to adjust psychologically to a serious illness, according to several studies. But new research suggests that they may also be more likely to exacerbate their own suffering in the final days of life and to leave behind caregivers who have a hard time adjusting to bereavement.

A recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* finds that cancer patients who use "positive religious coping," or collaborating with God to overcome illness, are more likely to seek heroic measures in an attempt to prolong life. These religious patients were three times more likely to opt for mechanical ventilation and other intensive procedures in their last week of life.

Researchers at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston already thought that religious patients would opt for more aggressive care at the end of life, but said they were nonetheless a bit surprised by the study's results.

Because religious patients often trust in God's sovereignty and believe in an afterlife, "one might expect them to be more accepting of death and let nature take its course at the end of life, rather than pursuing very aggressive treatments," said Dr. Andrea Phelps, lead author on the study and senior medical resident at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Boston.

Such a view, she said, reflects a commonly held assumption about how religious patients approach the prospect of imminent death. But, Phelps added, there are a few possible reasons that religious cancer patients commonly opt for aggressive care in their final days.

Among the possibilities:

- faith leads to optimism, even when a prognosis is bleak;
- faith gives purpose to suffering, and in turn helps patients muster stamina for invasive treatments;
- beliefs about sanctity of life may give rise to a quest to prolong life at almost any cost.

We were concerned” by the study’s findings, Phelps said. “We are worried because aggressive care, at least among cancer patients, is a difficult and burdensome treatment that medically doesn’t usually provide a whole lot of benefit.”

To be sure, not everyone who looks to God for help in battling cancer is determined to prolong life even at great cost. Tad Woodhull, a 75-year-old boat dealer in Owls Head, Maine, believes that “God has protected me for some reason” in two bouts with cancer over the past 25 years. But he also watched his brother endure a “miserable” final six months in aggressively battling lung cancer, and has resolved not to experience the same.

“I would go with faith rather than put myself and my family through a version of hell,” says Woodhull, an Episcopalian. In a bleak late-stage situation, he said, he’d decline invasive medical options and instead trust God with his soul. –G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Religion News Service*