

Hope, help, and humor when facing a life-threatening illness

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My father, Morty Sosland, MD, was a psychiatrist in a community health setting when he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS; Lou Gehrig's disease) in April 2020. He continued to work until February 2021 and credits his ongoing resilience to what he refers to as "the 3 Hs": hope, help, and humor. Although he can no longer speak, I was able to interview him over the advanced technology that is text messaging.

Sarah: Hi, Dad.

Morty: It's Doctor Dad to you.

Sarah: I guess we are starting with humor, then?

Humor

Research has demonstrated that humor can have serious health benefits, such as decreasing stress-making hormones and altering dopamine activity.¹ For individuals facing a life-threatening illness, humor can help them gain a sense of perspective in a situation that would otherwise feel overwhelming.

Sarah: I feel like a lot of the humor you used with patients was to help them gain perspective.

Morty: Yes. I'd have to know the client well enough, though—and timing is important. My patients would come to me with a long list of challenges they had faced in the week, and I would say, "But besides that, everything's good?"

Sarah: And besides the ALS, everything's good?

Morty: Exactly. I'd also use magic or math tricks to make kids like coming to therapy or to reinforce important concepts.

Sarah: How has humor helped you cope?

Morty: Thinking about things in humorous ways has always been helpful. I used to say my Olympic sport was walking to the dining room with my walker. Unfortunately, I can't do that anymore, so now my Olympic sport is getting out of bed. It's a team sport.

Sarah: And that's a good segue to...

Help

Countless studies have shown the impact of social support on health. Good social support can increase resilience, protect against mental illness, and even increase life expectancy.² Support becomes even more critical when you are physically dependent on others due to illness.

Sarah: Was it difficult for you to accept help at first?

Dr. Sosland practiced child, adolescent, and adult psychiatry at community health organizations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and is the author of the children's book, *The Can Do Duck: A Story About Believing in Yourself* (<https://thecandoduck.com>). Ms. Sosland is a case manager for pregnant and parenting teens in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and created the illustrations for *The Can Do Duck: A Story About Believing in Yourself*.

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Clinical Point

In the face of a life-threatening illness, hope must be multifaceted

Morty: I would say yes—but at the same time, I accepted it because the illness was so shocking. I learned early on this was a fight that my family would also fight alongside me.

Sarah: I remember you would quote Fred Rogers.

Morty: Actually, it was Fred Rogers' mother. She would tell her son during hard times, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." Helpers can be family members, friends, doctors, and aides, as well as others who have the same illness.

Hope

In the face of all life's challenges, hope is important, but in the face of a life-threatening illness, hope must be multifaceted.³ In addition to hope for a cure, patients may focus their hopes on deepening relationships, maintaining dignity, or living each day to its fullest.

Morty: Early on in this illness, I chose to set a positive tone when I told people. I would say I have the top doctors and there is more

research now than ever. Years ago, I wrote a children's book with the mantra, "I say I can, I make a plan, I get right to it and then I do it."⁴ My plan is to be around for at least 30 more years.

Sarah: Do you think it's possible to hold acceptance and hope at the same time?

Morty: Acceptance and hope are not easy, but possible. I get down about this illness. In my dreams, I walk and talk, and most mornings I wake up and see my wheelchair and I think this is absurd or a different choice word. But I focus on the things I still can do, and that gives me a feeling of hope. I can read the latest research, I can enjoy moments of laughter, and I can spend time with my family and close friends.

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