

# Use of Storytelling as a Cancer Communication Methodology

## Background

Storytelling can be an effective means of communicating information related to cancer. Health messages given in story form have been found to influence healthy behavior in multiple studies. Based upon the theory of reasoned action, stories also influence people's normative beliefs if they perceive that "important others" endorse the behavior. Foremost, stories have the ability to put abstract ideas into concrete forms. For example, personal testimonies of the benefits of mammograms by women who survived breast cancer have a greater potency than an enumerated list of reasons for seeking screening.

Multiple forms of storytelling have emerged and have been tried and tested around health issues. Role model stories have been successfully used in HIV prevention strategies. Role model stories use multiple formats including the print media, television or personal testimonials. Lasting visual images or mental pictures can be created through visual narratives from television, movies, and personal narratives. Visual and mental images increase a sense of self-efficacy as individuals imagine themselves going through the steps of screening, diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship. Storytelling has also been used to help people manage their emotions after a cancer diagnosis to allay fears, promote interpersonal relations, share personal emotions, shape coping skills, and enhance problem solving. Multiple national cancer organizations promote the use of the internet for writing about one's cancer experiences.

Storytelling is used in many cultures to communicate information about cancer and other health issues. American Indian and Native Alaskan populations use storytelling as an acceptable mode of communication through *Talking Circles* that integrate culturally symbolic stories. The African American *Witness Projects* use survivor stories extensively to inform about breast cancer; and the Hispanic *Promotoras* have compiled and composed readings of personal experiences and shared them as dialogs with communities.

Storytelling has long been recognized as a fundamental communication method in Appalachia. Personal and community experiences have been collected and told using *story circles* through which cancer survivors educate communities about risk factors and appropriate use of cancer care. These stories often emphasize a "neighbor helping neighbor" approach. Cancer support groups use survivor and caregiver newsletters to publish spiritually rich stories as messages of hope. Other Appalachian community groups have developed traveling performances for educational purposes.

The prevalence and use of storytelling in cancer communication and education throughout Appalachia is unknown. We seek a review of community-based examples that describe various methods and content of storytelling specifically for cancer in Appalachia.

## Questions

1. How is storytelling used by Appalachian communities? For which health topics? What stages of the cancer continuum of care are most frequently addressed?
2. Who organizes the storytelling efforts? Is professional communication support available and used to assist in formulating messages? How do communities/groups assure that the cancer messages are accurate? Do the communities/groups know about and use available state cancer registry data? Are the communities/groups aware of the state's cancer plan and cancer program and coalition? What national cancer organizations and educational materials have been used (e.g., Susan G. Komen for the Cure, American Cancer Society)?
3. What types of evaluations have storytelling projects in Appalachia designed regarding effectiveness as a means of communication? What findings have been reported?

## Action Point

Identify and interview community groups from multiple states that have collected stories and developed and shared products about community's cancer-related experiences. A sufficient number of examples should be profiled to describe multiple product forms (e.g., performances, publications, on-line groups, etc.).

*\*These groups should not be the communities involved in the program funding this opportunity.*