Hepatitis C: Postponing Pain

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The moment an ill can be patiently handled, it is disarmed of its poison, though not of its pain. ~ Henry Ward Beecher

There is one aspect of hepatitis C that sends shivers down the spine, and that is the liver biopsy. As a nurse, I have had to explain to patients what the procedure entails, and their eyes widen with sheer terror.

Fear of pain is one of most universal of human experiences. The up side of fear is that the possibility of pain may keep us from doing incredibly stupid things, or at least to do them with some safety in mind. The down side of fear of pain is that sometimes we generate so much anxiety that the anticipation of pain can be worse than the actual experience. The liver biopsy is a good example--it is usually much easier than it sounds.

I wish I knew a way to make this procedure easier or unnecessary. I'd settle for finding a way to make the fear vanish, but other than meditation, prayer, Valium and bourbon (just kidding), I don't know any secrets. I will say that it is easy to tell someone that the procedure is a piece of cake, but until one goes through it, it is pretty much impossible to believe it is going to be anything short of being impaled on a sword.

In reality, what little discomfort there may be will be there whether one is anxious or not. Why make it worse by adding the burn of worry to the procedure? I have had five liver biopsies; three were done with the help of conscious sedation, so when I had those, I was quite relaxed. The other two, I was pretty nervous about, and terrified that my nervousness would make matters worse. After the first procedure, I decided that if I was going to ever have another biopsy, I had to postpone all worry until the day of the procedure. This helps. Then on the day of the procedure, I tell myself to at least wait until I get to the hospital. In short, procrastination works really well on the nerves.

The bottom line is that the worry hurt much more than the liver biopsy, so finding ways to worry less, improved my life tremendously.

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