

Engaging the Community in Recovery

In a recent email, Chien-Chi Huang writes, “Looking back, the most frightful thing that happened during my cancer journey was not losing my hair, my breast or [potentially] my life—it was losing my mind!”

Over two phone interviews, Chien-Chi Huang gave a stoical description of her cancer journey through paranoia and depression into wellness. She explained she experienced paranoia and delirium, rare side-effects of the steroid Prednisone, during her cancer treatment. [While living with her in-laws], she interpreted her in-laws’ refusal to accept meals and carpool offers from neighbors and friends as their way of intentionally isolating her from the outside world because they were ashamed of her. At one point, Chien-Chi even lost trust in her husband, and threatened to remove him as the Health Care Proxy.

On her later depression, she adds, “I think my depression was partly caused by the isolation and also the toxic chemo drug lingering in my body after the treatment.”

Since Chien-Chi could not find the support she was looking for, she started the Asian Breast Cancer Project. “I wanted someone from my culture, my background, who spoke the same language,” Chien-Chi explained. She gave an example from the Asian Breast Cancer support group: “We were talking about diet and someone mentioned the food Mother made you when you were sick. Everybody’s eyes lit up.”

Chien-Chi’s climb back to feeling better began with the example of others. She said she had a revelation in a support group she was in, in which a husband and wife both had cancer. Their example of a fighting spirit inspired her to stop focusing on herself and to see how she could help other people. She chose to start in Asian-American women’s communities, to help bridge the gap between Asian and American concepts of health and wellness.

“Asian people don’t separate mental health from physical health,” explained Chien-Chi. “They think they are ‘out of balance’ and need to restore harmony of their mind and body.” Chien-Chi feels that American mental health treatment providers need information about Asian health culture and the role of the individual within the family. The collective good of the family is considered more important than the needs of the individual. Chien-Chi explained that sometimes health providers will encourage people to get well for the benefit of their family, in case they do not consider their own benefit a good enough reason to follow treatment.

She went on to say that cancer is stigmatized in Asian Communities. “Some people still think it’s bad luck to be around a person with cancer,” she explained, “or that they got the cancer because they did something wrong.” In addition, “Asian people are taught not to talk about suffering—women especially.” If the suffering is due to mental health causes, stigma may prevent the Asian man or woman from talking about it directly. “Instead he or she may talk about having a headache or being unable to sleep.”

Chien-Chi said there is a high rate of suicide among young Asian women and that Asian women have a high rate of depression. Second Generation Asian-Americans may struggle with issues of identity that First Generation Asians do not have, or have in a different way.

“It’s important to respect the culture of the person who is being treated,” added Chien-Chi. “Ask what is the problem, what do *they* think the problem is. Include them, negotiate with them.” Working with the person also includes selecting an interpreter carefully. A young woman would not be ideally chosen to interpret for an older man, and it is not desirable for a family member to do the translating, e.g., a son translating for his mother about issues with her reproductive system.

In addition to the Asian Breast Cancer Project, Chien-Chi is presently the Executive Director of Asian Women for Health (<http://www.asianwomenforhealth.org/>).

Chien-Chi has received multiple community awards for advocacy for Asian American healthcare, and has had numerous speaking engagements on Asian culture and mental health. Chien-Chi Huang has turned a devastating experience with cancer and depression into an opportunity to create resources for Asian-American women in Massachusetts. Indeed, she herself has become a resource for Massachusetts service providers wanting to understand more about health care for persons of Asian-American cultures.