

## FALSE HOPE

What would you do with a time machine? There's the obvious opportunity to alter one's destiny or make a fortune betting on sports. But as a physician I'd like to go back and re-do those moments with patients where I wish I'd done better.

I remember a woman who came to see me in my office as a new patient. She was in her early 60s and had noticed a lump in her breast some months previously but had not had it looked at. By the time she came to see me it had progressed to a large mass that was invading through the skin and was likely advanced cancer. It was becoming infected. Speaking with her I remember trying to choose my words carefully as we discussed the situation. I failed miserably.

Somehow I had the idea that I needed to be sympathetic but that I also needed to be 'realistic' with her. I had the idea that it would somehow be bad to offer too much 'false hope.' I guess at some level I wanted to convey that her disease was significant — especially since she had been hesitant to seek care previously. I wanted her to know that she needed treatment and follow up — that it wouldn't just go away or something to that effect. I would give anything to have that conversation back.

In the end I'm not even sure of the outcome. I just met with her that one time. I referred her to a surgeon and an oncologist and she never came back to follow up with me.

I wish now that I would have gone out of my way to project hope rather than the tepid, tempered optimism that I came up with at the time. A larger expression of hope would have been so valuable for her as she faced cancer.

The experience left me thinking — what is 'false hope' anyway and why did I have the instinct to try to be realistic and not offer too much of it? I guess on the surface I was worried that by being too optimistic she might have been disappointed or might not have sought out care. Somehow maybe I thought that by not being realistic my credibility would suffer. I didn't want expectations to be too high. Otherwise — God forbid — the outcome might have been worse (or different) than expected. I guess I somehow had the impression that she should be 'prepared for the worst.'

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My poor showing was a lesson. I try now to eliminate phrases like ‘false hope,’ or ‘cautiously optimistic’ from my thinking and certainly from any conversations I have with patients. To me nothing in medicine is more important than belief. Patients do better when they believe in their physician and in their treatment. We all know about the placebo effect and I like to think of it as one of my greatest allies.

I now try to project the image that nothing is impossible. No obstacle is too great and no condition is without a solution. This is not false hope or false anything. It is not irrational. It is not overly optimistic. It does not involve wearing rose-colored glasses. The human body has a wonderful innate capacity for healing and recovery.

Ultimately there is no such thing as ‘false’ hope. There is only hope — pure and simple.

