

Audio tape help women fight their fears

by Terri Finch Hamilton
The Grand Rapids Press

Nightmares of her mother's breast cancer used to jolt Terry Bienkowski from slumber. She lived in terror of the disease. She was too scared to get mammograms. What she didn't know, she reasoned, wouldn't hurt her.

She knew better.

A hypnotherapist who has studied and taught about the subconscious, Bienkowski knows how powerful the mind is. Maybe if she concentrated on positive thinking, trained her mind to turn fear into calm, she could sleep. She could live.

She decided to create an audio tape for herself, full of guided imagery and calming thoughts. If it worked for her maybe it could help other women fearing or facing breast cancer, too.

"Into the Heart of Breast Cancer" is the result. One tape is designed to help women turn their fear into peace and draw on the strength they might not realize they have. A second tape tells the breast cancer stories of five West Michigan women and how they've coped.

Bienkowski has a home office in Ferrysburg and an office in Grand Rapids. Her mother was 46 when she died of breast cancer in 1981.

Her grandmother had breast cancer, too. So did an aunt. Two friends recently had mastectomies.

"I started seeing a lot of women with breast cancer in my therapy practice," she says. "They had a lot of common characteristics. They were all women who had trouble expressing their feelings. They were caretakers. They give, give, give, but give to themselves last. Their needs were not being met."

Her recorded meditations invite women to find a quiet place, make a cup of tea, get a notebook and pen in case they want to jot down a few thoughts.

"It seems 90 percent of what's out there about breast cancer is about the physical," Bienkowski says. "This is about a woman's emotional well-being."

She asked local women to write her letters about their breast cancer experience, then Bienkowski, included their stories on the tape, recorded locally at River City Studios. Mothers, a grandmother, a massage therapist, an artist talk about how they survived - through positive thinking, nurturing themselves, expressing their feelings, listening to their bodies. They share entries from journals. They tell of knots in their stomach that come with each mammogram. Of saying goodbye to a breast. Of learning not to sweat the

small stuff. Of finding something positive in chemotherapy - you don't have to shave your legs.

The recordings are being used at the breast cancer clinic at the University of Chicago Hospitals and at Gilda's Club. Bienkowski was at the University of Chicago Hospitals last week, teaching guided imagery techniques to the nursing staff there.

Peggy Baker, director of psycho-oncology programs at the University of Chicago Hospitals, recommends the recordings to her patients.

"Women find them extremely helpful to help them relax and feel less anxious," Baker says. "Women with breast cancer often report they wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep. It's often because of their fear and anxiety: Listening to the tapes before they go to bed may help them sleep through the night."

Sister Sue Tracy, O.P., director of holistic health at the Dominican Center at Marywood in Grand Rapids, listened to the tapes to see if she could recommend them to the women she help. She can.

She had a mastectomy 12 years ago, then a recurrence of cancer five years ago. Today she calls herself "a thriving cancer survivor."

"I found them enlightening, insightful, informative," says Sister Tracy, 58. "It was as if she were talking directly to me. "You hear women who have been through rock-bottom moments, yet they're alive," Sister Tracy says. "I don't think you have to have cancer to listen to those stories and find hope."

She listened to guided imagery and meditation tapes by Dr. Bernie Siegel before every chemotherapy session.

"There is a gift in allowing yourself to slow down from the rat race pace and allow words of comfort and positive energy to filter in," she says. "I'm a naturally optimistic person, but, by golly, I had my tough moments of tears and doubt."



Press Photo/ Dianne Carroll Burdick

Terry Bienkowski decided to create an audio tape of guided imagery and calming thoughts to help herself and other women face breast cancer.

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This is about a woman's emotional well-being"

-Terry Bienkowski

Confronting her own fears, she found a way to help others

Bienkowski's guided imagery tapes encourages women to relax, to get in touch with their hearts, to send healing energy throughout their bodies. Bienkowski recommends, listening to that tape daily for a month, then gradually less. "After that, you should feel more optimistic, more hopeful," she says. "You should find that you're focusing on the things that are working in your life, rather than on what's not working."

"They'll get you in a relaxed enough state so you're not focused on fear."

As the tapes make their way around the country, gradually appearing in hospitals and in bookstores, Bienkowski is getting letters of feedback.

A woman from Gainesville, Georgia, wrote:

"Being a non-aggressive person, I was very

uncomfortable with the concept that I had read in books on breast cancer that said to imagine an army of Pac Men destroying cancer cells. I already felt my body had been invaded, and I did not want to launch any further attacks. Terry's concept of love transforming cancer cells into healthy cells gave me a sense of well-being. I no longer see breast cancer as a tragedy. I have learned how to take care of my body and how to live each day, joyously."

"When I got that letter, I just cried," Bienkowski says. "Other women have told me that the language of these tapes is so much easier for them."

The language is of love and positive energy, of finding inner strength and peace. "This isn't about curing. It's about healing," Bienkowski says. "Curing is when a disease goes into remission and is no longer there. Healing is coming to a sense of wholeness in yourself."

"I've had clients who died from this disease, but when they went, they went in peace," she says. "They lived every day they had to the fullest. To me, that's healing."

That's how it was with her mother, Mary. But before

she died, Bienkowski's mother asked her only daughter if she could find her help. A faith healer - anybody. She was desperate.

Bienkowski didn't know what to do. So she did nothing. Then, for years, she felt responsible for her mother's death.

"I didn't know then what I know now," she says on the tape. "Maybe now I can answer her

request. I can give others the help I didn't know how to give my mother.

"Because of my mother, maybe more women will be able to change their path for the better," she says. "Not only women who have breast cancer, but women like me, who have feared it for so long. Maybe now we can all begin to heal our wounds."

Meanwhile, the nightmares are gone.

Visit Terry Bienkowski's web site, Gold Heart Productions (www.GoldHeartProductions.com), or call (616) 844-4416 for more information and products.

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**-Sister Sue Tracy
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