Louise Neigel, a patient at Penn’s Abramson Cancer Center (ACC), first learned about the Writing a Life patient writing workshop two years ago while undergoing chemo treatment at the Perelman Center. Created in 2015, the support group helps participants — most of whom are cancer patients receiving outpatient treatment at HUP — use expressive writing and prompts as a way to interpret their experiences.

But two obstacles prevented her from joining: her chemo treatments never coincided with days when the sessions were held, and she lives over 90 minutes away from HUP. COVID changed all that. A now-virtual Writing a Life for Physicians, providing the ACC’s doctors, too, “an opportunity for a time of reflection and expressive writing that they otherwise may not have the opportunity to do,” Blackburn said.

Typically, support groups are disease-specific, i.e., for patients with breast cancer, colon cancer, etc. Before COVID, “we had experimented with open groups — where participants would be diagnosed with any cancer and in any part of treatment — but they had not done well,” said Heather Sheaffer, DSW, director of Patient & Family Services. “What has worked in COVID mode is the exact opposite. “Patients are looking for an opportunity to interact with others,” she continued. “It’s been a complete 180-degree turn. Patients and families get so much support in waiting rooms but that no longer exists. This is one reason the virtual groups are so successful. They’re getting informal support.”

Expanding Writing a Life

Writing a Life for Caregivers and Patients is another in-person support group that has transitioned to a virtual venue. And, in the COVID environment, it has served as a conduit for bringing families together when visit restrictions in hospitals kept them apart.

Indeed, Blackburn was able to virtually unite an inpatient and her husband, who was at her bedside, with their adult children just before the start of a session. The children were all gathered in front of a computer at the family home. “The children were engaged in the overall group and responding to others,” Kotler-Klein said. “It was so powerful to have the family join the group.”

The same session united an adult daughter and her mother, who were in different states, for this real-time activity.

Members of Patient & Family Services also created a new virtual Writing a Life for Physicians, providing the ACC’s doctors, too, “an opportunity for a time of reflection and expressive writing that they otherwise may not have the opportunity to do,” Blackburn said.

Deborah Burnham, PhD, associate undergraduate chair in the University’s Department of English, leads all of the Writing a Life groups. At each session, she provides prompts, such as poems, articles, and illustrations, that she hopes will resonate with participants. For the physician group, she used “The Doctor,” a 19th-century painting by Luke Fildes showing a physician sitting at a child’s bedside.

Art and poems provide prompts for patients to write about their experiences.

Although Frank Leone, MD, MS, director of Penn’s Comprehensive Smoking Treatment Program, does not have a pediatric practice, “the image was deeply personal to me. It reminded me literally of what I do in the ICU, sitting at a patient’s bedside, feeling frustrated and not being clear about the decisions I had made… the uncertainty,” he said. At the session, he discovered that “dealing with this uncertainty was a primary source of my stress. You may not be aware that this is a stressor but when you learn this, you can manage it better… because it won’t just disappear.”

Burnham said that the virtual setting has helped patients manage stress.

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And they had to make sure it was easily accessible. “We didn’t want any barriers to participation,” Blackburn said. “There’s no need for a computer. You can access with any telephone — a landline if necessary. Most people want the visual element but some don’t.”

In addition to quickly learning how to navigate the virtual landscape, they also needed to revise group guidelines that in-person groups don’t need to consider, for example, suggestions to find a quiet and private place for people at home or elsewhere to join the virtual group. And, as with all support groups, “we emphasize diversity, respect, kindness, and confidentiality,” Kotler-Klein said.

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FOOD INSECURITY

HUP FOOD PANTRY

TACKLES Employee FOOD INSECURITY

Keeping staff employed during the pandemic has been a priority for Penn Medicine and HUP leadership, but other external COVID-related factors, such as the loss of a spouse’s job or children no longer receiving lunch at school, have placed a strain on some staff members’ family finances. Suddenly, food insecurity — an inability to afford or access enough nutritious food to sustain a healthy life — has become a reality.

The HUP Pantry provides a way to help supplement food for those HUP employees who were now facing this uncertainty. Modeled after the “Pantry Parlor,” which distributes food to employees at Pennsylvania Hospital, HUP’s pantry is open to any employee who comes to the distribution site on Founders 3. Each bag contains enough nonperishable food to “feed at least a family of four for one day,” said Sofia Carreno, M.N., RN, Nursing Professional Development specialist - Community Engagement, who oversees the program.

How It Got Started

Jessie Reich, M.N., director of Magnet Strategy, was instrumental in planting the seed for the HUP Food Pantry and pulled together a team to get the initiative up and running, which included Aaron Berman, assistant executive hospital director for HUP Operations; David Cribb, director of Volunteer Services; Frank Connolly, assistant executive hospital director for Physical Plant; and Joe Forte, director of HUP Security. Together they identified easily accessible locations for the drop-off bins for donations (the White Building entrance on 52nd Street, the Nursing Renewal Center on 2 Donner, and the hospital cafeteria) as well as a space where donations could be safely stored and handed out: Plaza A on Founders 3.

Since the call for donations to the HUP Food Pantry went out, food and monetary contributions (including gift cards) started pouring in, including a generous donation by the Board of Women Visitors. “We have partnered with A&W food service vendor to have them deliver food to the pantry that we purchase with the donation money,” Carreno said. They also put out a call for volunteers to help stock items on the shelves and assemble the food bags and several employees stepped up to the task.

Then, three days before the HUP Food Pantry opened “for business,” on May 27, Nursing put up signs to circulate the information across different departments. It started slowly — on opening day, nine people came to pick up a bag. But, by the third day, more than 100 employees were lined up. Today, up to 45 employees come every day. “As of the end of August,” we had distributed 1,000 bags to employees in need,” Carreno said.

Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner in Each Bag

Each of the food bags is assembled according to best nutrition guidelines. For example, a sample bag might include a box of oatmeal and applesauce for breakfast; peanut butter, canned chicken or tuna fish, crackers and juice for lunch; and canned beans, canned greens, and spaghetti and sauce for dinner. “We will also include small items such as toothpaste and shampoo, feminine products and diapers,” Carreno said, as well as a Philadelphia Food Resource guide, which can connect families in need to more accessible and long-term services.

Donations continue to come in from staff and, with the uncertainties surrounding COVID, Carreno said they are working with departments and other Penn communities to make the program sustainable long term.

“We try to make people coming feel comfortable,” Carreno said, “and the employees are so appreciative. That’s one of the best rewards of starting this. It’s a great opportunity to directly serve our own family at HUP.”

HUP FOOD PANTRY

HELP PATIENTS STAY CONNECTED

 Patients with advanced cancer understandably feel a lack of control in their lives. “The only thing you can control is your response to it,” Blackburn said. “What do you want to do with the time you have left?” Another new virtual group — What’s the Meaning of This? — was formed to help patients maintain or increase a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, despite cancer. Kotler-Klein, Blackburn, and Melick are also a “Health Care Hero,” which is someone whose dedication inspired a donation to the Penn Medicine Friends Fund.

“Monroe greets the patients by name with a smile, instantly putting them at ease and assists them to where they need to go,” Kain said. “His kindness helps to comfort them and set a tone for their encounter with Penn Medicine.”

How TO HELP OR SUPPORT OUR EFFORT

The HUP Pantry is located on Founders 3 in Plaza A (right above the cafeteria). It is open to employees to pick up bags of food on Wednesdays, from 7 am to 3 pm. If you’d like to donate money to the HUP Pantry, go to https://bit.ly/3zVGyGQ. To volunteer in the Pantry, go to https://bit.ly/3xUx5N

CANCER CENTER VIRTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS

To learn more about these virtual support groups, call Patient and Family Services at 215.615.0534.