

Making CERTain

A 20-year liver recipient offers his ideas on successful transplant living

BY LEE DOWNING

As a 20-year liver recipient, I recently was asked by another recipient during a support group meeting about the keys to living successfully after transplantation. After some contemplation, I realized the answer revolves around four main principles, which I called “CERT.”

C—COMPLIANCE

One of the leading causes of late graft loss is noncompliance. In order to have a successful lifelong transplant, you must take your prescribed medications and attend your scheduled clinic appointments. As the old adage goes, timing is everything.

Take your medication at the designated times as directed by your transplant team. If you are required to take a medication at 6- or 12-hour intervals, there’s an important therapeutic reason. The same applies to your appointments for check-ups. Adhere to that schedule and, if something happens, reschedule the appointment for as soon as possible. You’ll have a greater opportunity of sustaining your transplant and having a normal lifespan.

E—EXERCISE

Pursue some form of physical, mental and spiritual activity on a regular basis. Go for a daily walk, practice yoga, learn a new dance step. Those simple activities done on a regular basis increase your oxygen intake and keep your body toned.

Published studies suggest that mentally challenging activities, like reading and crossword puzzles, may deter Alzheimer’s disease. By keeping your brain active you might protect yourself against future memory loss. A healthy body contributes to a healthy mind—and vice versa.

Spiritual expression can strengthen your resolve and patience in overcoming transplant hurdles that may come your way. Find a spiritual community. Seek spiritual guidance when you need it.

R—RESPONSIBLE CORRESPONDENCE

Regular contact with your donor or donor family is a privilege (and, in my way of thinking, an obligation) that each transplant recipient should try to fulfill.

It is generally understood how invaluable it is to send a card, note or letter to let your living donor or donor family know how grateful you are—it’s positive for you and for your donor family. I am always surprised when I hear how many recipients have never attempted to correspond with their donor family. That first letter can be daunting, but there are resources to help you get started.*

Your cards or letters could be sent on holidays, your birthday or your transplant anniversary—or on no particular occasion at all. The correspondence need not be elaborate; a simple greeting card can work small miracles.

Several years ago a donor mother told me that a simple acknowledgement from her son’s recipient, who was healthy and living a full life, was so very important to her. “It helps me realize I’ve done the right thing,” she said.

What do you do, though, if you contact your donor family but never get a response?

Once, when I was speaking at an organ-donor awareness program, I told the audience that, although I hadn’t yet received any letters from my donor family after years of writing, I continued writing



out of a sense of obligation and a desire to let them know what their gift of life meant to me. I was frank in stating how I had become increasingly frustrated when there was no acknowledgement of my letters.

After my presentation, a gentleman approached me, saying that he was a donor father and that I should continue writing to my donor family. He said he had received letters for six years from the recipient of his son’s liver, but that he’d never opened the letters until recently. He just kept the unopened letters in a shoebox, he said, until he was emotionally prepared to read them.

That gentleman helped me realize that there’s no time limit for bereavement, and I should continue writing despite my personal feelings of frustration.

So, I continued to write to my donor family and, after 12 years, I received a first letter from my donor’s spouse. She said she’d received all of my letters and was thankful, but that she was just now capable of responding.

Now, imagine if I had given up and stopped writing. I would have missed that letter and the others, the invitation to her daughter’s high-school graduation and wedding. Most important, I would have missed meeting her, which was extraordinary.

T—TRANSMIT

Transmit compassion; use your gift of life to practice “random acts of kindness” toward others. As transplant recipients, we can never hope to pay back our donor or donor family for their selflessness, but we can “pay it forward” in a way to ensure that the chain of giving to others will continue beyond the span of our lives.



Think of doing acts of kindness for others as a means of honoring your donor and donor family. The following words from an unknown author on a poster I saw recently provides an important perspective:

100 years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world will be a better place because I was important in the life of another person.

I am convinced (“CERTain”) that if transplant recipients incorporate these four simple principles into their daily lives, their lives will be healthier, happier and fulfilled tenfold—and so will the lives of those with whom they come into contact.

Wishing you the best of health. **U**



Lee E. Downing had a liver transplant on Aug. 12, 1988. Since then, he's been a passionate advocate for donation and transplantation—while working full-time as a senior product specialist at Fujisawa Healthcare Inc. in North Wales, Pa. An author, he also has served on the OPTN/UNOS minority affairs and patient affairs committees.

*For help in writing to your donor family, visit UNOS' patient website, transplantliving.org (after the transplant > staying healthy > contacting your donor family).

Note: An earlier version of this article appeared in the National Kidney Foundation's Transplant Chronicles (vol. 11, no. 4) and now can be found at organbuddies.com (> articles), the website of Organ Buddies Inc. Downing founded the company in 1994 to promote donor awareness and help ease the transplant journey for others.

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UNOS RECEIVES HEALTH-CARE TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION AWARD

UNOS was honored with the Packet360 & Cisco Systems technology innovation health-care award for contributions to the technology economy in the Richmond, Va., area. The award was presented at the Greater Richmond Technology Council's (now, RichTech's) annual “Technology Stars” awards gala, held May 14 at the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

The honor recognizes companies for their health-care-related information technology that creates or enhances new processes, methodologies or services for the benefit of others.

UNOS LAUNCHES CREATIVEAID

Through its new business entity, CreativeAid, UNOS now offers members, nonprofits and health-care organizations “better communication by design.”

CreativeAid consists of an award-winning staff of communication and design professionals providing the following services at competitive rates:

- corporate identity and branding
- graphic design and production
- website design and development
- multimedia development and video production
- exhibit and presentation design and
- copywriting and editorial services.

CreativeAid was launched in response to requests for graphic-design assistance coming in to UNOS' communications department and to generate additional revenue to support programs relating to UNOS' lifesaving mission.

The transplant community already has seen some of CreativeAid's work through materials developed for such clients as Donate Life America, Association of Organ Procurement Organizations and Transplant Financial Coordinators Association.

To see examples of CreativeAid's award-winning work, visit creativeaid.com. For more information, send an e-mail to info@creativeaid.com or call (804) 782-4608.



UNOS PUBLISHES ANNUAL REPORT

UNOS has published its 2008 annual report, “UNOS Begins with You.”

Distributed nationally to OPTN/UNOS members and others in the transplant community, a copy of the report also is available, free of charge, on UNOS' online store, unos.org (online store > for the professional).

