



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## meeting surgery with grace and equanimity

**F**acing surgery is a frightening proposition for most of us. Several years ago I put together a list of things I believe to be helpful, so here they are again.

**KNOW YOUR SURGICAL TEAM:** the doctors, nurses, technicians, and the hospital that will have your life in their hands. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I feel absolutely confident in their skills and knowledge?
- Would I feel confident in them making life or death decisions for me if the need should arise?
- Do they listen to me and patiently and respectfully answer all of my questions? Do I understand what they say? Do they understand what I say?

If the answers to any of these questions is 'no,' talk to your surgeon and see if you can come to a comfortable place. If you feel your doctors are unresponsive to your concerns, get a second opinion. If you decide to go with a competent surgeon whose bedside manner is not a good match, try communicating with others on the surgical team who may have more compatible styles.

Perhaps most importantly, if the answers to the questions are "yes," tell your providers how much you appreciate them and voice your confidence in them. They will be surprised and grateful and you will go into surgery as a real team.

**ASSEMBLE YOUR SUPPORT TEAM:** Before you go into surgery, think about what you will need before, during and after the procedure. Also think about who can support you through the experience. Have as many support people as possible so you do not wear a few people out.

Prepare meals in advance, find out which grocery stores and pharmacies make home deliveries. Think about what you will need in the way of entertainment: borrow upbeat, funny or soothing videos from friends; have your favorite comfort foods available; make sure you have easy access to a phone (that you can also turn off when you are resting.)

Ask someone to be a contact person for you, relaying information about the outcome of the surgery and how you are doing until such time as you want to take over that responsibility. Make sure you have help taking care of children or pets while you recover. Remember your first priority has to be healing.

Friends and family are usually our first allies, but our spiritual communities may offer help as well. Ask the social worker at the hospital about any other public assistance that might be available. Agencies are available to send people to your home and help with nursing and self care tasks, if you can afford their services.

**GET YOUR AFFAIRS IN ORDER:** Take time to make sure you have a will, a living will, and other health related documents and make sure your surgical team knows your wishes and will carry them out. Have back-up documents held by your primary support person. If you are in a committed relationship, but don't have the legal support of a marriage, make sure that you and your partner's wishes are legally documented.

**SAY THE THINGS YOU NEED TO SAY** to the people you love. Quite likely everything will go well, but don't leave things unsaid. You cannot tell people too often that you love them.

**GEAR UP PSYCHOLOGICALLY FOR THE EVENT:** Get all the information you need. Some people want to know every detail of the procedure, others want a broad overview. Some people want to talk with others who have been through the experience and others don't want to listen to anyone else's stories. You know what is best for you. Talk to friends, do whatever you need to do to feel safe and confident when you enter the hospital.

Consider listening to deep relaxation/affirmation recordings in anticipation of the surgery. I personally like Belleruth Naparstek's work, available through [www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com). Consider learning self-hypnosis to focus your energy on healing and coping with pain. Evidence suggests that using self-hypnosis or positive relaxation/affirmation recordings can have a beneficial effect on healing and recovery time. Many surgeons allow patient's to wear headphones during surgery.

**HAVE OTHERS AVAILABLE TO ADVOCATE FOR YOU:** If at all possible, have someone with you for the entire time that you are in the hospital, but at least until you are able to understand what is being done to you and why. Hospital errors are all too real and many can be avoided with vigilance. With different nurses on every shift, there is often no one who is aware of subtle changes that friends and relatives notice. Make sure your advocate is someone who can be assertive and persistent on your behalf if needed. Joe and Terry Graedon, of *The People's Pharmacy* ([www.peoplespharmacy.com](http://www.peoplespharmacy.com)) offer wise guidance in this area.

**PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR RECOVERY:** Pay attention to your recovery. Take the doctor's estimate of how long your recovery will take with a grain of salt. Follow the doctor's orders religiously, it will hopefully speed your recovery. However, sometimes despite your best efforts, your recovery may not proceed as you and your doctors hoped. Be patient and gentle under those circumstances, do not judge yourself as weak or a failure. Do not feel embarrassed to ask questions if something does not seem right.

We are fortunate to have surgical procedures available that increase both quality and length of life. As positive, empowered, knowledgeable patients we can do our part in order to ensure the best outcome possible. ❧❧❧

---

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: [www.stewartpsychologists.com](http://www.stewartpsychologists.com)