

our current emotional state. When we are ready and able, our cup will overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving for life restored.

### Scars That Must Be Recognized

Surgery leaves scars, some visible, others less so. Scars take on different meanings. For some people, they may reflect their love of someone to whom they have donated an organ, while for another they are a reminder that they are vulnerable and imperfect. Consciously and unconsciously, pain and scars have spiritual significance. Regardless, the very presence of scars affects our body image. It can be hard to remember that our scars do not define us.

### Patience Is Truly a Virtue

Along with the work of rehabilitation, intentional patience is one of the positive ways we can take action after surgery. Our body expresses an incredible will to live. It is doing the best it can. Our recovery graph can move up and down, not unlike our heartbeat. It helps us to think of recovery not in terms of one day to the next, but in terms of one week to the next.



If on Shabbat, for example, we compare our condition to what is was on the previous Shabbat, we may realize that healing is indeed taking place. Recovery is an opportunity to halt the fast pace of our activity and to reset priorities, remembering the reasons for which we braved this surgery in the first place.

### How Extraordinary Our Aliveness!

No human sings a one-note song. We are a symphony of harmonies, capable of many emotions at the same time. Appropriately, the anticipation of surgery and recovery can seem “awe-full” to us: deeply frightening yet rich in wonder and amazement. Even in the fear, we cannot deny that our body, mind, and soul are miracles. How extraordinary our aliveness! How wondrous that we can endure so much and yet heal!



# Facing and Recovering from Surgery

[www.baycrest.org](http://www.baycrest.org)



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## Surgery is Hard Work

Surgery is an experience out of the ordinary. Even for those of us who have experienced more than one surgery, it is never the same experience twice. As such, it is not something for which we can easily prepare.

Having surgery is very hard work physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We Jews care deeply about the implications of the words *shalom, shaleim, shleimut*. Not only do they mean peace—peace of heart, of spirit, of family, of country and of relationship—but they also mean wholeness, completeness. The very act of surgery slices into and splits our completeness. Consciously or not, we are no longer whole.

Some people have surgery because without it they will die; others to determine the extent of their illness. Still others chose their surgery for personal reasons. There are as many reasons to have surgery as there are individuals to experience it.

## Surgery Requires an Act of Faith

Yet, there are commonalities among all surgeries. In each case, we literally entrust our very being into the hands of another. In each

case, our sense of person is disrupted. Our ability to control who and what we are and have known ourselves to be is violated. In many ways, having surgery requires an act of faith.

It is an act of faith not only in those who will be treating us, but also in our future. We are not having surgery to maintain a status quo; we have surgery as a tool of hope. We want to live, to be free of pain, to improve our quality of life. Intellectually, we know that surgery can guarantee none of these things. Not until the surgery is over will we know if our dreams are to become reality.



## Each Surgery and Recovery is Unique

We may find it helpful to speak with another individual who has experienced the same surgery, but we must remember that no two individuals will react to the same surgery the same way. We must not judge our experience of surgery or recovery relative to another's, and we must know that our reactions are "normal for me." But another person can help us anticipate some things we might not have considered and put our mind at ease about others. It helps to know that we are not alone. It helps to learn that others have confronted similar realities and fears and are doing well.

## Dealing with Pain

Pain is an intimate and subjective experience. The more we understand about our pain, the less it can control us. Pain is not something that we have to "tough out." God did not create us to be martyrs, but rather to do the best we can with what we have. We have a physiology that uses pain as an indication of physical stress and trauma that needs attending. Medications are available. We are blessed with the wisdom and kindness of doctors and nurses who do not want to see us suffer unnecessarily.

## Emotional and Physical Challenges

Our response to surgery is not only physical but also emotional and spiritual. A woman experiencing the pain of childbirth will have a different relationship to her pain than will one who has just survived a mastectomy. An athlete who has a limb removed because of a cancerous tumor will have a different relationship to his trauma than will an individual who sustained extensive burns from having smoked in bed. Our experience of illness fits within the context of our life as a whole, which we struggle to endow with meaning.

After surgery, we may be surprised by our feelings. Though we know that we have been saved from debilitation or even death, the discipline of gratitude may be challenging. Our body feels fragile; we are afraid. We may be reacting to the anesthesia and our medications, and/or we may experience postoperative depression. The associated melancholy is not far behind and can be debilitating in its own right. This feeling does not define our personality; it simply reflects