

Surviving Cancer: Moving Beyond Uncertainty

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You're all survivors. Perhaps the only difference lies in how many times you've been scared the cancer will come back. The essence of cancer survivorship isn't the kind of treatment you had. Some of you had surgery only. Others had the whole enchalada: surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. It isn't the change in your body the cancer and its treatment precipitated. It isn't just the economic and social cost either.

The essence of cancer is the inescapable realization that bad things can happen not just to good people but they can happen to you. And you don't have a guarantee they won't happen again. The illusion that you're bullet proof has been shattered. You have entered the world of uncertainty, where you face the unknown (and perhaps unknowable) and feel vulnerable.

Cancer is a chronic disease. Even when your body is cured, your mind remembers what you went through. Time is often reckoned as BC and AC: Before Cancer and After Cancer. Things are different after cancer.

So, how ARE you going to live with uncertainty? No doctor can guarantee the cancer won't come back. No 5 year mark without a recurrence proves the cancer is cured. There are stories about people who had cancer come back 25 years later.

What can you do to resume to your life, living it fully, aware that you've been changed by your experience and accepting the new facts of your life?

There are a lot of ways you can live as a cancer survivor. One way is called the "look over my shoulder and jump at any loud noise" approach. Imagine, wasting 25 years fearing something that may never happen.

Another way is the "whistling in the dark" approach where you publicly deny any problems but secretly search the obituary columns to make sure your name isn't there.

There is the "I'll only think about it just before my doctor's visit" approach. A lot of people are able to put cancer out of their minds completely until they get a test or see their doctor. Of course, they also are able to spot the word "cancer" in the middle of a newspaper article at 20 feet.

Then there is "put more padlocks on the door" approach. These people take seriously every story about this herb or that healer, this supplement or that therapy that is promoted to treat or prevent cancer. I've seen patients taking over 40 different bottles and jars of stuff—stuff they can't pronounce or understand, just because somebody told them it would help. Food isn't enjoyed, it's chosen for its healing qualities. Every moment is spent in "fighting cancer." They have become professional cancer patients.

We believe there are better ways to be survivors, ways that don't ignore the uncertainty the diagnosis of cancer brings. We believe there are ways that make the uncertainty, if not irrelevant then at least much less important. There are ways of moving beyond uncertainty. There are specific steps you can take to live in the world where the future is unknown and you may feel vulnerable.

Do what is within your control

Maintain your relationship with the medical system. If your relationship with your doctor is good, keep it up. If it could be improved, take steps to do so. (At the church we attend (LAUMC) we teach a class called the "Smart Patient." It is open to anybody.) Keep your appointments with your doctor. Get your follow up tests if

requested. Take your medicines. It is a fact that 75% of all prescriptions are not taken as directed.

Become healthier.

Make your lifestyle healthier. Exercise. Every study that has examined the impact of exercise on cancer has shown that regular exercise reduces the risk of cancer. At minimum this means at least 10 miles brisk walk per week or 30 minutes daily. More exercise is better. The walking can reduce cancer by 15%; serious training can reduce it by almost 50%.

Eat healthy food. Research on diet and cancer has shown that poor diets are associated with higher risks of cancer. No study has shown that taking vitamins or supplements prevents cancer in humans. You've got to eat the food. God knows more about vitamins than Merck or Mannitek.

How do you know what foods should you eat? (We'll say more about this at our next talk at 1:30.) Here are some mnemonics.

1. Fins and feathers are fine, forget about four-footed foods.
2. Don't go near the south end of the cow.
3. An all beige meal is bad for you.
4. Simply, eat produce.
5. More simply, More foot, less fork.

Improve your quality of life.

The better your life is, the greater the desire to stay alive. Yes, pleasure does increase the will to live. If stress has an impact on cancer it does so by making life less pleasant and the body starts asking questions like, "Why go on if tomorrow is just like today?" Write down 10 things that give you pleasure or are fun. Do them regularly.

Quality of life often depends on who you're with. Cultivate good relationships. That isn't always easy; for some people dealing with relationships is harder than dealing with cancer. Though it sounds banal to say this, to have good friendships you need to be a good friend. Be friendly. Good things happen.

Quality of life also depends on the meaning or purpose you find in life. What brings you a sense of fulfillment? What helps you connect with a sense that the world specifically needs you? What do you do or say or know that makes your life worthwhile? Why do people thank you?

Sometimes a higher purpose is the same as a deeper commitment to life.

Recognize fear for what it is.

If there is a tiger in the room, you are in danger. If you think there is a tiger outside the room, you are in fear.

Fear exists. It is a universal human experience. The original word in the Old Testament that has been translated as fear originally meant "to tremble when encountering a force." Cancer is quite a force. It is natural to tremble a bit when encountering it.

One of the problems with cancer-or whatever you fear—is that it seems so much bigger than you are. It feels overwhelming. The trick is to either reduce the size of the fear or to increase your own presence. Make the playing field level.

You have to get the “D” word out of the closet. Death. Dying. Disability. What is it you really fear?

Is it the possible pain of dying? Is it what happens after you die? Is it being unable to do the things you want to do? Is the fear that you will die not having lived, not having reached your goals or lived out your hopes?

If you are going to deal with your fears successfully you have to recognize them for what they are. Sometimes there are answers if you just ask the right question. I reassure my patients that they need not fear pain. There are so many ways to treat it effectively that any competent physician can relieve pain. Sometimes just identifying the fear will let you take action; **Don’t put off until tomorrow the life you can lead today.**

One of the other problems with fear is that it can trap you. It can feel like you’re wrapped in a tangled mass of strings that prevent you from moving. If all you can see is the fear, if all you look at are the knots that keep you tied up, you may not notice the ends that can be unraveled and set you free. Fears often have a beginning. When you investigate the root of your fear the tangle begins to unwind, releasing you.

Respond to Vulnerability Creatively

Being vulnerable, as dreadful as it may feel, is a good thing. It means you are growing. It means that you are on the threshold of becoming someone new. Do you know how lobsters grow? They molt. In order to grow bigger they have to shed their protective shell. For a few weeks while their new shell is hardening they are vulnerable to predators. They have to grow so they have to go through a period of vulnerability.

Responding to vulnerability creatively requires trying new solutions. Consider the following.

There is an antidote to fear: Hope. Both fear and hope look into the future and anticipate some event. The only difference is what is expected. Fear awaits something you don’t want. Hope looks toward the desirable. Keep the ability to look into the future but switch the focus to something you do want.

Similarly, you can reestablish balance by countering the unpleasant feelings with their antidotes.

The opposite of darkness is light. Bringing out what is hidden into the light, like peeking behind the curtain in the Wizard of OZ, puts things in perspective. Preserving your sense of humor brings lightness when you feel grim.

The opposite of weakness is strength. There is strength in numbers; surround yourself with supportive people. Everybody has an inner strength that can be summoned when necessary. You may have to search for it but it is there.

The opposite of being trapped is taking action. Taking action can include getting accurate information to answer your questions rather than relying on half-truths, anecdotes and your imagination. Taking action may be doing the things that your inner wisdom tells you to do. Like inner strength, everyone has an inner healer whose advice may not be easy but is generally correct.

There is one final secret we have to tell you about moving beyond uncertainty. It is a mantra you can repeat endlessly. It is guaranteed to get you out of the tightest jams, the scariest places, the most difficult circumstances. Here it is:

“I have a choice.”

Such a simple fact is so frequently forgotten. We have choices. They choice may not be between chocolate and vanilla. It may be between the lesser of two evils or the easier of two difficult tasks. Yet we do have a choice.

We have the choice between accepting what is true and responding as best we can or caving in and giving up. We have the choice of seeing the few swallows in the cup or the empty space above them. We have the choice to be grateful for what we have or resentful for what we've lost.

You did not choose cancer. Since you're here now, at some level, you choose to be a survivor. The uncertainty has always been there. You may not have noticed it before the cancer, but it was there. Now choose the rest of your life. Choose to live beyond the uncertainty and enjoy a full, rich and very large life.

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