

COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF CANCER (Excerpt)

Neil Fiore, PhD

Since being diagnosed with cancer over 30 years ago, I've worked with cancer patients, their families, and with Oncology departments across the country. From my clinical work with hundreds of patients, and what I've learned from the research literature, I've chosen five activities that may reduce stress, improve attitude, and possibly strengthen immune system response.

. . . seeing illness as an occasion to make positive changes in your life beyond the disease itself is a creative adaptation to a major life threat. . . . Your illness is an occasion to reevaluate life – a wake-up call, not a death knell. When your life is threatened, take hold and make the most of it; don't give up on it.

-- David Spiegel, M.D., *Living Beyond Limits*

Taking charge of your energy, your time, and your relationships is part of the empowerment that can come from surviving a crisis such as a cancer diagnosis. Studies of cancer survivors indicate that several elements appear to correlate with a healing of the spirit and optimizing the body's ability to heal:

- **EXPRESSION** -- express honest emotions – especially the more difficult emotions of anger and sadness – rather than try to be stoic or try to be falsely cheerful.

[see James W. Pennebaker's *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* for evidence of improved immune system response.]

Tell yourself, "I can be with your emotions. They don't scare me. I will not abandon you."

[Note: These are not the typical affirmations. *You* are soothing the frightened and overwhelmed parts of you. The *you* that is your larger, stronger Self is speaking from an empowered protective/leadership role to your body and smaller parts.]

- **HEALING ATMOSPHERE** -- practice meditative or relaxation exercises for stress and pain reduction and to protect yourself from stressful events and thoughts. Replace stress with Safety: for example: "This is only a 3.0 on the Richter scale, not the end of the world. Regardless of what happens, you're worth as a person is safe with me. I won't let this ruin my evening. I will not make you feel bad."
- **WONDER** -- maintain a sense of wonder about how your body will work with medical treatment and use it's own wisdom to heal and create greater comfort.
e.g., "This is going to be interesting. I wonder how I'll get through this one? I wonder what resources my body and mind will muster to cope with this?"
- **ACTIVE PARTICIPATION** -- maintain some control over medical decisions, seeking second/third opinions, asking questions of the doctor, knowing what you can do [e.g., exercise and diet, meditation or prayer] that could enhance the effects of medical treatment and strengthen your body.
e.g. "You don't *have to want* to take this treatment. But *I* – my strong Self - can *choose* to do what increases my chances for survival."
- **LETTING GO** -- mourn and acknowledge your losses and adapt to the present condition, rather than struggling to change the past. ***Accept yourself as human.***
e.g. "That *was* awful. It really hurt. It's over. And *now I can choose* what to do to minimize my pain and maximize my joy."

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EXPRESSION -- express honest emotions -- especially the more difficult emotions of anger and sadness, rather than wasting valuable energy in stoic denial or false cheerfulness.

Write or record your feelings and thoughts every day. Do not ruminate about difficulties for more than an hour before expressing them to someone or writing them out. Shout them in your car. Sing the Blues. Dance, walk with a vengeance. Get it out of your gut-level response and put it into words and movement. Express the feelings in a safe environment but do not identify with them.

HEALING ATMOSPHERE -- practicing hypnotic or meditative relaxation for stress and pain reduction. Use 3-part breathing:

Take three slow, deep breathes – inhale, hold, exhale slowly – floating down into the chair. Close your eyes and float down into the support of the chair, the building, the earth. Remind yourself that all around you is a protective atmosphere weighing at least 14 lbs. per square inch – thick enough to burn up meteorites. Imagine this atmosphere as a white or golden light three to four feet all around YOU, protecting you from the noises outside and giving you all the time in the world to push aside any concerns or unwanted thoughts; all the time in the world to delegate energy to your Inner Healer, your wise body. **Connect** your mind to your body’s wisdom rather than struggling alone.

WONDER -- maintaining a sense of wonder about how your body will cooperate with medical treatment and has it’s own wisdom to heal

Use any sign of worry – holding your breath, muscle tension, tightening your jaw, fist, or forehead – as a signal to let go of holding and to delegate that energy to the superior wisdom of your body, your Inner Healer, your Inner Physician. Be honest about your fears and worries but do NOT assume they’re real or that they will happen. Know that statistics are NOT real for the individual. No one can predict *your* odds. Maintain a sense of wonder.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION – maintain some control over medical decisions, asking questions, knowing what you can do in the way of exercise and change in diet that could enhance the effects of medical treatment.

Refuse to make yourself feel like a victim by repeating “I have to . . . [take chemotherapy, go into surgery].” Calm your body and soothe your mind by taking some control, adapting to reality, and **Choosing** to do what makes sense to you.

LETTING GO -- mourning your losses and move on to adapting to the present condition, rather than struggling to hold onto the past

Use all “should’ve/could’ve” thoughts about the past to **wake-up** to NOW. Catch your mind drifting into the past and future to bring it back to maximize the pleasure of the moment and what you **can do now** that is consistent with your current goals.

Based on Dr. Neil Fiore’s 2009 book, *Coping with the Emotional Impact of Cancer: Become an Active Patient and Take Charge of Your Treatment*** [Bay Tree Publishing, 2009] and “Healthy Imagining” – an audiotape for patients by Neil Fiore at www.neilfiore.com/products.shtml

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