
Thoughts on
Living with Cancer

**Positive Thinking –
Helpful or Harmful for
Cancer Patients?**



by Caren S. Fried, Ph.D.

My Personal Experience

In 1994, I was told those fateful words: “You have cancer.” At that time, I was 35 years old, a biologist, wife, and mother of a two year old. I was diagnosed with lung cancer, even though I had never smoked. My cancer treatments included two major lung surgeries (which resulted in the removal of my right lung), various standard and experimental aggressive chemotherapy treatments, and numerous alternative therapies. Despite all this, my cancer persisted. But so did I!

A turning point occurred for me when I decided to focus on my health instead of my illness. I believe that cancer is an illness of the body, mind, heart, and soul. Therefore, for me being healthy meant dealing with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues related to cancer as well as undergoing the physical treatments. In addition to the various conventional and alternative therapies which I pursued, writing became an important part of my own healing journey with cancer. To be able to express my emotions, thoughts, and beliefs in writing was critically important for my own overall health.

These pamphlets grew from the numerous notes that I wrote every day in my healing journal. The information that is available for newly diagnosed cancer patients can sometimes be overwhelming. It was my intention, therefore, to write short pamphlets concerning various topics that deal with the practical issues of living each day with cancer. I hope that these pamphlets will encourage discussion of topics that are often difficult yet necessary to deal with and to help cancer patients and their families make the numerous decisions that need to be made during this time.

Healing is a very personal issue and each person must find his/her own path to healing from cancer. To this day, I continue to focus on my health each day, to live a full active life as a mother and wife, and to pursue a new career as a writer despite cancer. It is my hope that these pamphlets will be useful for others seeking out a healing journey while living with cancer and beyond.

Caren S. Fried

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I learned that it was critically important for me to acknowledge and express my fears before I could acquire healthy beliefs that enabled me to move forward in my recovery. —C.F.


The Dangers of Positive Thinking

“**A** positive attitude will get you through this!” Have you ever been in a crisis situation and someone has said this to you? Or have you said this to someone else? After all, if you can't think of anything else to say, at least say something “positive.” Thinking positively can usually help, at least it can't hurt, right? Wrong.

The real danger to positive thinking is that it often results in the repression of “negative” emotions. Emotions such as sadness, grief, and anger are generally thought of as negative while happiness and love are considered to be positive. However, none of these emotions should be thought of as positive or negative. They are all simply emotions, neither good nor bad. The important point is that all emotions must be expressed once they are felt.



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Positive thinking asserts that if you think positive happy thoughts, you will be better able to overcome any crisis situation. The implication is that thinking negatively and expressing negative emotions will make you feel worse. In fact, attempting to cover up negative thoughts with positive thoughts can actually make a person feel worse. The danger, therefore, is that positive thinking might actually contribute to illness rather than promote health.

The key is to acknowledge emotions, whatever they are. The person who is experiencing the emotions must acknowledge them and express them in order to go on. If you repress your feelings, you can become “stuck” in your emotions and find it difficult to move on in a forward direction.

In the field of mind/body health, it is known that continual repression of emotions can cause blockages in your mind, body, and spirit. A continual build up of these blockages can lead to mental and physical illness. Full expression of emotions and feelings is necessary to restore and maintain good health.

The dangers of positive thinking are exemplified in the person who is diagnosed with cancer. It is natural to feel anger, sadness and grief after a cancer diagnosis. However, it is common for people to attempt to cover up these emotions with positive thoughts. Several researchers have shown that it is a common characteristic of cancer patients to have had difficulty expressing their true feelings and emotions long before their disease occurred. A diagnosis of cancer feeds right into this personality trait. Therefore, it is very important for the recovery of the cancer patient to express his/her emotions fully.

It is very important that family and friends recognize the needs of cancer patients to express their feelings. A

positive attitude on the part of the cancer patient might make the friend or relative feel better. However, telling the cancer patient to “think positively” is not usually helpful advice. The most useful phrase that a caring person can say is “It must be very difficult for you...” This acknowledges the difficulty of the situation and gives patients the opportunity to express their negative emotions if they want to.

Healthy Thinking


Dr. O. Carl Simonton (in *The Healing Journey**) presents the concept of healthy thinking for cancer patients as a better alternative to positive thinking. He distinguishes among negative thinking, positive thinking, and healthy thinking. The following example is taken from his book. It concerns a person's fear of death from cancer.

Negative thinking: I will be dead within two years regardless of what I do.

Positive thinking: I will be alive and healthy two years from now.

Healthy thinking: I may or may not be alive 2 years from now, but what I do makes a significant difference.

The healthy thinking statement is one that is believable. Hope is the belief that something is attainable. The key is that you must believe that what you are saying to yourself is possible and attainable. To cover up negative emotions with positive thoughts is not going


To cover up negative emotions with positive thoughts is not going to enhance your beliefs.


*O. Carl Simonton MD and Reid Henson, *The Healing Journey*. 1992. Bantam Books, New York.

to enhance your beliefs. This approach may make you feel better in the short term, but if it causes you to repress your underlying beliefs, it may actually contribute to illness in the long term.

Changing Underlying Beliefs

Dwelling on the negative thoughts is not the answer either. Some research indicates that negative thoughts can compromise your immune system while positive thoughts can increase immune function. Research suggests that people who have a positive attitude about their cancer treatments tend to do better overall. If you find that you are thinking negatively too often and that it is detrimental to your health, then it may be necessary to attempt to change your underlying beliefs. There is a significant difference between suppressing negative emotions in an attempt to think positively on the surface versus choosing to change underlying beliefs in order to avoid dwelling on negative thoughts and to promote moving forward in your recovery.

Changing your underlying beliefs is a tremendous challenge. The first step is to recognize the underlying belief that is causing your negative thoughts. Then through self-education and introspection (i.e., your inner wisdom), it may be possible to change your beliefs. Each person must determine for himself/herself what he/she need to do to change his/her beliefs. Meditation, visualization, and psychotherapy are extremely useful for changing underlying beliefs. Qualified health professionals can be very helpful and supportive in this endeavor.



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Summary

In summary, the key to optimum mind/body health is to:

- 1.** recognize your emotions, whether negative or positive
- 2.** express your emotions fully
- 3.** think of a statement that reflects “healthy” thinking and is based on your underlying beliefs
- 4.** attempt to change your underlying beliefs if they are hindering your recovery from illness and preventing you from moving forward in your life.

Cancer is a terrifying, life-threatening disease. Avoiding this reality does not make it any less frightening. Expressing sadness, anger, and grief about having cancer is not only “normal”, it is a necessary part of the process of healing from cancer and gaining renewed health. Once these emotions are acknowledged and expressed, new healthy beliefs can enable you to move forward in your healing journey.


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Thoughts on Living with Cancer
Pamphlets

Cancer as a Whole-Body Illness



How to Be an Active Participant in Your Own Recovery:
Guidelines for the Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patient.



Coping with Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy



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Suggestions for Friends and Relatives of the Cancer Patient



An Introduction to Alternative/Complementary Therapies for Cancer



Being a Parent with Cancer



Diagnosis Cancer: Why Me?



Healing and Dying



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