

Meeting the Emotional Challenges of Cancer Treatment

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"When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Having a significant illness poses a major threat to our sense of well-being, and some diagnoses, such as cancer, are more threatening than others. A diagnosis of cancer brings many conflicting emotions because patients must confront not only the disease but also the powerful treatments to cure it.

While emotional distress such as anger, anxiety, and depression is common, some 35 percent of patients diagnosed with cancer experience distress severe enough that it disrupts their ability to cope with cancer and its symptoms and treatment.

Facing a diagnosis of cancer raises the question: "What does it take to get through a tough time?" We might wonder why do some people meet the challenge of illness better than others. Psychologist Dr. Salvatore Maddi claims that it is our level of psychological hardiness that determines how we respond to the pressures of life, which includes coping with sickness.

Maddi began his work studying hardiness in 1981 with a company that downsized its 26,000 employees to half that number. Of the employees who remained on the job, some thrived while others developed significant physical and emotional health problems. According to Maddi the people who did the best demonstrated the three key features of psychological hardiness.

Known as the 3 C's of hardiness, they are challenge, control, and commitment. These key characteristics of successful coping have been evaluated in a variety of demanding settings ranging from businesses to battlefields and from schools to medical clinics. They have proven useful

in explaining what helps people to flourish through the hard times of life.

Challenge is the first C of hardiness. How we view a problem is important. Psychologically hardy individuals see problems as challenges rather than threats. This difference is important because when faced with a threat, there is a tendency to try and avoid it. Hardy people see problems as challenges and rather than being overwhelmed and seeking to retreat, they get busy looking for solutions. Seeing a problem as a challenge mobilizes our resources to deal with it and encourages us to pursue the possibilities of a successful outcome.

The second C of hardiness is control. In a tough situation hardy individuals do not become overwhelmed or helpless. Instead, they strive to gain control of what they can by going into action. While acknowledging that many aspects of a crisis situation cannot be controlled, they also understand that by intentionally developing and holding onto a positive, optimistic, hopeful outlook we can always determine our reaction to any predicament that confronts us. We can choose our best attitude, and the better we are at doing this, the greater our sense of being in charge of our circumstances.

Commitment is the third C of hardiness. It refers to persevering or sticking it out through a hard time. Being committed to an outcome keeps us going even in the midst of setbacks, obstacles, and discouraging news. Being committed to a goal helps us overcome occasional losses of motivation and to remain steadfast in our efforts.

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P psychologically hardy individuals who confront cancer are able to transform the threat into a *challenge*. When they receive the diagnosis, they do not give up in despair but look for what they can do to help regain their health. They plan for success and look for ways of understanding their illness that offer hope. Hardy patients find a meaning and purpose in what they are going through that motivates them to keep moving forward.

Rather than feeling helpless, hardy cancer patients demonstrate *control* by becoming active participants in making decisions about the type of treatment they will seek. They also seek out resources for information about their cancer knowing that being well informed gives them a greater sense of power. Furthermore, knowledge of what is coming means that they can get ready. For example, chemotherapy patients facing possible hair loss prepare in advance by acquiring wigs and scarves long before they are needed. Being prepared *is* being in control. Other patients gain control by learning relaxation and meditation techniques that not only help to alleviate the anxiety of treatment but also to reduce some of the potential side effects of chemotherapy such as nausea.

Emotionally hardy patients show their *commitment* by persevering in treatment. They keep to their plan of treatment even on difficult days. Commitment is also seen in a determination to keep life as normal as possible by continuing to do what they enjoy. They stay active, knowing that physical exertion will build their energy reserves. Hardy patients don't withdraw and isolate themselves but are determined to maintain relationships by reaching out to others, and because they are deeply dedicated to facilitating their healing, they work at understanding and expressing their

emotions. While remaining strongly independent, hardy patients are able not only to allow others to help them, but to also ask for help when they need it.

The 3 C's of hardiness are fundamental in enabling cancer patients to maintain a hopeful outlook. This is vitally important because optimism, having an attitude of hopeful expectation for positive results, is recognized as a key ingredient in the process of healing.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Is the glass half empty or half full? Do you see the doughnut or the hole? What is your usual point of view in life? Is it the bright side or the dark side? Which is the best way to be? There is a saying about optimists; they may not live longer than pessimists, but they have more fun. And, it is jokingly said about pessimists that they don't live longer than optimists, but their overly negative outlook just makes it seem that way.

We now know from recent research at the Mayo Clinic that optimists live both better and longer than pessimists. When a group of ordinary people was followed over a thirty-year period it was found that attitude and outlook influenced health. Those people with more positive attitudes were happier, healthier, and living longer. Those with negative pessimistic attitudes were not only unhappier but had a 19% greater risk of premature death.

So, you see, attitudes are important.

Each thought arising in our brain carries chemical messengers throughout our body. Positive thoughts are associated with messengers that build the immune system, and negative thoughts have chemical components that can wear it down. Over

time pessimistic thinking may compromise our immune systems, and the doorway to physical illness may be opened. The good news is that we can change our attitudes. We can learn to be more optimistic.

We all live in a difficult world, but it is not the difficulties and misfortunes alone that harm us. It is our perception of them. It is what we tell ourselves about them. It is what the Voice of Conscience says that is crucial. The Optimistic Voice of Conscience tells us the best while the Pessimistic Voice points out the worst.

We all have such an inner Voice, and it is more or less optimistic. If this Voice is already positive, we can strengthen it. If the Voice is negative, we can change it. We can become "intentional" optimists, however hard work is required. Being negative is easier, but it is not as healthy.

The key skill in optimism is talking sense to yourself. Learn to catch the Pessimistic Voice in action and challenge it. Don't let it drone on and on about how terrible everything is, and how you will never get better. Start paying attention to what you say to yourself. You may have automatic hopeless responses of which you are unaware.

Listen for the voice of doom and despair and challenge it. When you hear it saying, "You never succeed," ask, "Is this true? How do I know? What is the evidence?" When you hear, "Nothing ever goes your way," Call time-out. Is it really true that nothing has ever gone your way? No! This is negative exaggeration, and you can challenge this self-talk. The best way to do so is by confronting what is known as the 3 P's of a pessimistic mindset.

The first *P* of pessimism stands for personalization. If we are pessimistic, when something bad happens, we personalize it by overly focusing on questions such as "Why me?" and "What did I do to deserve this?" As a result, we may blame and criticize ourselves for being in our circumstances. We think, "If only I had not done such and such, then I would not be in this bad situation." Looking for what we may have done wrong is a waste of time and can mire us in useless self-pity. Taking things personally is nothing more than a building block for the negative emotion of despair.

The second *P* stands for pervasive, as when we take a bad situation and spread it over all aspects of our lives. We start thinking; "This (whatever it may be) ruins everything," as we overlook the fact that many aspects of our lives are unchanged. While we may not like what is happening, if we look around, we will most likely find that the birds still sing, the sun rises, and people still love us. Everything in our lives is not affected unless we make it so in our minds. We can choose to be optimistic by intentionally focus on what is right rather than what is wrong.

Permanent is the third *P* of pessimism, and this refers to the tendency to assume that something bad will never change. If we convince ourselves that a negative situation will not improve, we begin to believe that it will last forever, and that we are doomed. However, we are only doomed if we continue this kind of thinking, and, fortunately for us, we can always change our thinking by focusing our mind on the positive.

We think ourselves into pessimism, and we can think ourselves out of it, but we must think about how we think to do so. If you

teach yourself to think more optimistically, life will go better no matter what your circumstances. Do this and you will be engaged in the practice of resiliency.

In physics, resiliency is the ability of a material to quickly return to its original form after being bent, stretched, or twisted. Psychological resiliency is a similar concept. It is the ability of people to return to normal by bouncing back from the ups and downs of life.

Your level of psychological resiliency depends upon three key features.

As already suggested, the first is attitude. Resilient people consistently choose to have a hopeful expectation for positive results. This expectation does not discount the negative events of life, but intentionally and realistically looks for the best outcome in any situation. It is this looking for the best that pulls resilient people through hard times and puts them back into shape.

The second element of resiliency lies in knowing how to manage stress. Life is naturally stressful and resilient people know how to take purposeful action to control it. They avoid whatever stress they can by saying “no” and setting limits, but they also practice unwinding from stress. Such unwinding may be through physical exercise, as with a daily workout at the gym, or it might involve the practice of meditation, tai chi, or yoga. Unwinding from everyday stress can be as simple as taking a slow, mindful walk through the neighborhood.

The third characteristic of resilient people is that they enjoy life by making the intentional choice to participate in it. Resilient people accept the fact that on some days you don’t “feel” like going to

work, cleaning the house, or attending a party. However, they also know that it is important to do these things whether or not you feel like it.

Each day should provide a sense of accomplishment and joy. This means that it is important to both have fun and to get something done. The accomplishments and joys do not have to be sensational and may be as basic as making the bed and petting your dog. It is primarily the appreciation of such simple joys and accomplishments that keeps life in balance. Resilient people know this so they intentionally engage in the daily practice of enjoyment.

If you want to be more a resilient person, try these three steps. Choose your best attitude, learn to manage your stress, and then have some fun on purpose. Engaging in resiliency will facilitate the process of healing.

Healing is more than just recovering health. It is a way of living that rejuvenates life with energy and purpose needed to help us to get through a difficult time. When we are ill and seeking to regain our health, we must take good care of ourselves at four essential levels of living.

First, there is the level of the body, and this is what we usually focus on. We seek to make the body well and to be physically healthy. This involves nutrition, exercise, and following your physician’s recommendations for treatment. The other three levels of healing are the emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.

On the emotional level, healing is to be able to accept all of our emotions without judgment and to express them properly to

others. It is not to lock them up inside and let them fester. It is not to have emotional explosions. It is not holding back from showing tenderness and love. Emotional healing is being aware of what you feel and being able to engage the emotion. Emotional healing lets us live fully and deeply.

The mental level refers to our thinking. It is about our attitudes, beliefs, and values. Mental healing comes with having the proper perspective on what you are experiencing. It is to understand clearly what is happening and to face it with a positive, realistic attitude. It is to avoid confusion and elaborate, worrisome fantasies of what might go wrong. Mental healing keeps you focused in the moment and provides the wisdom needed for daily living.

The spiritual level can bring a deep sense of meaning and purpose and provide a sense of connection to all that is. This level centers you with that which is greater than you—a “higher power.” With spiritual balance you look with awe on the simplest events of life and appreciate the beauty of the smallest moment. No longer feeling isolated, you look at the world through the eyes of love and ask, “What can I do for others?”

Consider the following questions as your guides to daily living.

- What are you doing today for your physical health?
- How are you opening to and expressing your emotions today?
- Today, how will you calm your mind and become focused?
- What is your spiritual practice for today? How will you enliven life?

Healing occurs when we accept the reality of whatever confronts us while continuing to put our energy into living a full life. Engage the four levels of healing every day, and you will be taking important steps toward your own recovery.

Illness can teach us things about ourselves that we did not know. It can show us our strengths, and help us establish our priorities for what really matters.

People often live through a crisis of illness and later claim that their life was changed for the better because they learned how to make fundamental life style changes. They report becoming more open and accepting of themselves and others, as well as developing a deeper sense of peace. In essence, they learned how to thrive in the face of adversity.

Thriving refers to an ability to benefit and grow from a difficult experience, so that you are able to function stronger, better, and more joyfully than you did prior to facing hardship. When you confront illness, set your goal to be a person who is able to thrive through adversity by:

- Using the 3 C’s of hardiness.
- Learning to be more optimistic.
- Avoiding the 3 P’s of pessimism.
- Practicing your resiliency skills.
- Working everyday to meet your needs at each of the four levels of healing.

Once you become a person who is able to thrive in spite of adversity, you will reap the profound benefits of Jonathan Swift’s blessing.

“May you live all the days of your life.”

How to Relax Your Body

All you need to know to begin undoing what stress has been doing to you is how to systematically relax all the muscles in your body. Here is how you do it.

Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed for about 15 minutes. Dim the lights. Locate a comfortable chair in which you can sit straight up with your feet on the floor. Sit comfortably in the chair. Pay close attention to how you feel as you begin. Notice any stiffness or tightness. Are there any aches or pains? Do you feel tense, frustrated, or keyed up? Pay attention to how you feel now because you are going to become more relaxed, and you need a point of comparison.

The systematic muscle relaxation procedure goes as follows.

While sitting quietly and comfortably, slowly inhale and slowly exhale as you close your eyes.

Next, bend your right hand back at the wrist and briefly hold the tension for about 10 seconds. Now relax.

Now do the same thing with the left hand. Hold the tension 10 seconds and now relax.

This time tighten both hands into fists and hold the tension. Feel it spread up the arms towards the elbows. Now relax.

Now bend both arms at the elbows and raise your hands up towards your shoulders. Tighten up the muscles in the biceps. Hold it. Now relax.

These three exercises have used the major muscles in the arms and started them relaxing. If you don't move them around, they will continue to relax becoming more and more relaxed, and you can forget about them

Next, turn your attention to your face. For your forehead raise your eyebrows up as far as you can and hold the tension. Now relax.

For your eyes close them and then squeeze the eyelids tightly together. Now relax.

For your jaw, just bite down and clamp your teeth together. Feel the tension along the jaw. Now relax. These three exercises have started the face relaxing.

For your neck just bend your head forward as if trying to touch your chin to your chest. Feel the tension along the back of the neck and now relax.

For your shoulders just raise them up as high as you can and notice the tension. Now let them drop all at once and relax.

For your chest you do two things at once. Take a deep breath and hold it while at the same time trying to touch your shoulder blades together by pulling your arms back. Hold it. Now relax.

For your stomach you just pull in as if trying to touch your backbone with stomach. Now relax.

For your back you arch out and away from the chair, and you can feel tension along the spine. Now relax.

With your feet flat on the floor, press down and feel the tension spread up the back of the legs. Now relax.

For the right thigh raise your leg up in front of you and feel the tension build. Now relax.

Now do the same thing with the left leg and relax.

Finally, for your feet bend your toes up as if pointing towards the ceiling and feel the tension around the feet and ankles. Once again, relax and stay relaxed as long as you like.