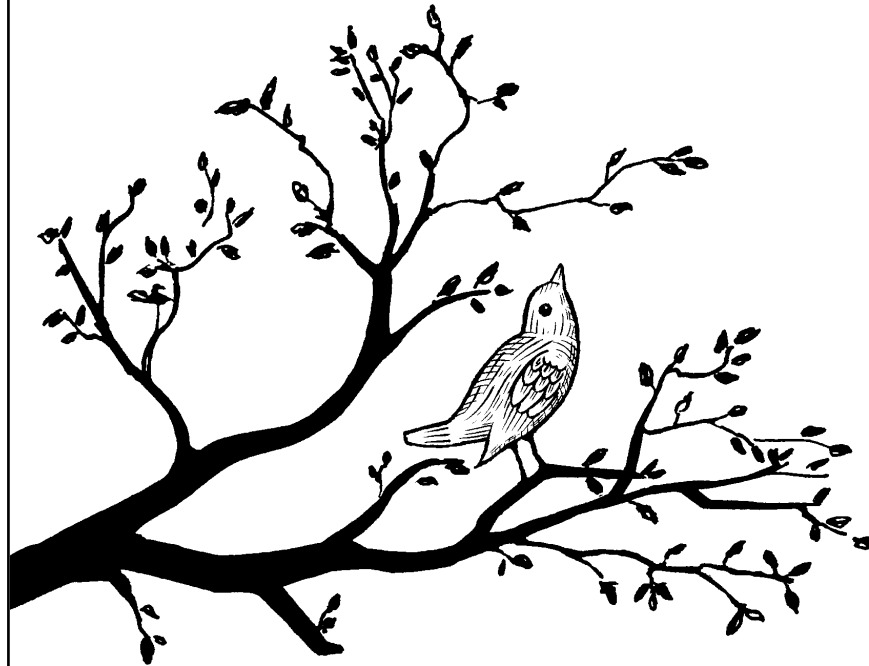


Thoughts on

Living with Cancer

Healing and Dying



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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Healing and Dying

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Healing and Dying

Reading books about dying as well as writing in my journal helped me to formulate my beliefs about death. It was important for me to create a sense of inner peace about death in order to continue living after my diagnosis of cancer.

—CF


For Persons Facing Their Own Death

After being diagnosed with cancer, it is inevitable that you will be thinking about the possibility of death. Whether your disease has been diagnosed as curable or incurable, this is probably the first time that you have come face to face with your own death. While this can be extremely frightening, preparing for your death (whether it is sooner or later) can also transform your present life.

Talking about death can be difficult. But not talking about it isn't any easier. What is most important is to try to create a sense of inner peace before your death. What are your beliefs about death? What happens to your soul? What is the meaning of life? What was the purpose of your life? Perhaps by contemplating these questions, you can create a sense of inner peace in your life now. You can choose to discuss these issues



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with a family member, friend, social worker, psychotherapist, clergy, or whomever you are comfortable with. However, if you are not comfortable talking to anyone, you can also deal with these issues on your own by keeping a journal, meditating, contemplating and reading books on dying.

Thoughts of death initially create much fear. It may be useful to think about which part of the dying process you fear the most. Do you fear the process of dying (and the possible pain and suffering involved), the actual moment of death, or what comes after death? By recognizing the aspects of death that you fear the most, you can try to address each issue in order to mitigate the fears.

In the process of dying, you will be teaching others about death. Other people will be watching you as a way of learning about facing their own death. This can also put you in the difficult position of having to deal with other people's issues about death. Other people's fears, anxiety, grief, anger, etc. about death will surface as they watch you in the dying process.

Consider having a healing ceremony with your family and friends. You can do this whether death seems imminent or still far away. Inner healing can occur regardless of whether or not your illness can be cured. It can be a wonderful experience to share stories, poems, songs, pictures, and more with family and friends. A ceremony that is performed in order to deal with death can also be a great celebration of life.

There will be many losses during the dying process. Sometimes the dying person is diagnosed as being clinically depressed and given antidepressants. It is important to note that the dying person is often going through the process of bereavement which is not the same thing as depression. While the other people

grieve the loss of the person after he/she is dead, the dying person grieves many losses before his/her own death.


While it is important to acknowledge these losses, it is also important to look back at all your accomplishments. In addition to your college degree or the project you completed at work, there is also the love you imparted to the people in your life. How have you shared your life with others? Who have you helped? Who have you shared your love with? Acknowledging all this helps create meaning to your life.

There are also the legal and financial aspects to consider, such as preparing a will, a power of attorney, and setting up trust accounts. Consult your attorney to make sure all of these are in order and up to date. You will probably feel a sense of relief when these issues are settled.

There are medical considerations, such as having a living will or health care proxy. You will need to discuss this with your physician and possibly your attorney. Now is the time to think about your end-of-life care so that you can have your desires known to your physician and your caregivers. You may want to consider where you want to die. Some people prefer to be in the hands of their physicians at the hospital while other people would prefer to die at home with their family with them. Make sure that your caregivers and your physicians know your wishes ahead of time. If you prefer to die at home, consider having Hospice volunteers help you and your caregivers.

For the Loved Ones of the Dying Person

The most important thing a caregiver can do to help a dying person is to work on themselves. What this means is to try to recognize your own feelings of fear,


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despair, grief, anger, etc. and how they may be affecting the dying person. Try to recognize and differentiate between your own feelings and those of the dying person.

Learn to be a good listener to the dying person. Don't feel that you need to fix their life problems. Ask the dying person if there is anything they would like to talk about. Let them know if you are willing to talk to them about death — theirs and yours. Talking about death should not be viewed as a sign of giving up on life. Death is a part of life. Talking about death can help transform your life.

See the dying person as a teacher for you. Use this time as an opportunity to work on your own issues of dying and death.



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How to talk to children about death

Be honest with children. Do not try to hide information for the sake of protecting them. This will simply cause them to distrust you in the future. How much information you give to younger children will depend on their age and ability to understand life and death. Give them important bits of information and then follow their lead by the questions that they ask.

Answering children's questions about death will force you to re-examine your own thoughts and beliefs about death. When children ask you questions about death, tell them what you believe and explain that other people may believe differently. Ask them what they believe. Don't expect them to believe something that you do not believe yourself. Children are very perceptive. They will be watching how you respond to their questions. Your reactions and emotions will tell them more than your words.

Tell children that death occurs when the body no longer functions. Don't tell children that death is like sleeping. They may acquire a fear of falling asleep at night. Don't tell children that the dying person is going on a long, far away trip. This may cause them to feel abandoned. Be careful what you say about God. If you say that God is calling you, children may learn to hate or fear God. Be careful about telling children that you will watch over them from the spiritual world. This can lead to a fear of ghosts.

What is most important is to emphasize that your love and spirit will continue beyond your death. Family members can emphasize the loving memories of the person and how their love can still be comforting even when they are no longer here. The love of the person who has died continues on in the hearts and souls of the people who are still living.

There are several books available to help adults talk to children about death. There are also children's books that adults and children can read together. Death is a part of life. Use this as an opportunity to teach your children about death.

Summary

Contemplating and discussing issues concerning death can be difficult, but it can also be very rewarding — both for the dying person and his/her loved ones. Discussing death brings the experience of death and dying into your present life. Remember that your love and spirit are eternal and that they will be carried in the hearts and souls of those still living.



The love of the person who has died continues on in the hearts and souls of the people who are still living.

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



Positive Thinking - Helpful or Harmful for Cancer Patients?



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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