

The Word Worse Than *Cancer*: **RECURRENCE**

BY DANIELLE TAYLOR

It was only a few decades ago that cancer was viewed as a death sentence. Chances of being “cured” of the disease were not great, and the topic as a whole was viewed as ugly and impolite—to the point where people wouldn’t even say the word (often using “The Big C” in a pinch). Today, with medical advances improving survival rates and awareness campaigns being launched around the globe, cancer is no longer a taboo subject. However, cancer survivors and doctors alike often shy away from discussing its ugly offspring: The Big R. As in *recurrence*.

“I’m much less worried actually having cancer than I would be if I were worrying that it’s going to come back,” says Laurie Kucharik, who has been diagnosed twice with ovarian cancer within the last two years.

Many cancer survivors identify with Laurie’s sentiment, as living in remission often means waiting for the other shoe to drop. To them, knowing about their prognosis and having a plan is preferable to the constant uncertainty of waiting and wondering “What if?” Others prefer to remain oblivious to the possibility, not wanting to go through that whole ordeal again and rationalizing that what they don’t know can’t hurt them. Regardless, most cancer survivors feel some level of anxiety about their chances of recurrence, and dealing with that uncertainty becomes a part of everyday life in the aftermath of the first diagnosis.

“‘Mystery’ things are always showing up on the CT scans, so you have to watch it,” says Beth Palmer, who was diagnosed with breast cancer and later pneumonitis, an extremely rare side effect of radiation treatments that causes inflammation in the lungs and pneumonialike symptoms. “It’s like it never ends, and so I have to accept it finally.”

In this way, learning to deal with the aftermath of cancer is really about learning how to cope with a whole new sense of “normal.” Your body may look, feel and act differently; you may have trouble doing things that used to come effortlessly. But the biggest change is this complete shift in reality, this total loss of naïveté. People who haven’t experienced cancer can express their sympathy, but they can’t truly understand how life is now completely split into the *before* and the *after*; the latter representing

an ever-present knowledge of what happens when your body turns against you.

Once your treatments are over, you may feel like the entire support system you’ve leaned on throughout your ordeal suddenly drops out from beneath you. You’ve been vigilantly going to doctor’s appointments, taking medication, enduring chemo and/or radiation and generally doing everything your physician advises in order to beat the cancer. Once that stops, you may feel like you’re no longer fighting it. However, balancing that with the knowledge that it may return one day can be really unnerving, to the point where many survivors choose to completely let go of that inner voice for self-preservation, albeit at the risk of missing the early signs of a recurrence, should one ever come.

“If you just stop caring, I think that’s a very valid coping mechanism,” says two-time cancer survivor Luke Holland, who is also a nurse at Duke Medical Center. “But it leads to maybe not following up with your doctor visits if something does come back.”

“The possibility of a recurrence is always there, and it’s very taxing for people to worry about what happens if it does come back. There’s a fine line between that excessive stress from fear of recurrence and deadening yourself to the point where you ignore what your vigilance needs to be in terms of following up with your medical team and doing what is reasonable.”

Decreasing the overall stress in your life tends to make you a healthier person, so a logical conclusion to draw is that by reducing the stress in your life (i.e. worrying about recurrence) you will lessen your chances of a cancer returning. Thoughts of recurrence will be natural from time to time (especially

immediately following treatments), but they should decrease to a manageable amount, similar to other health issues that responsible people monitor. If fear and anxiety of recurrence become a problem, to the point where they are consistently interfering with daily activities, relationships and/or work, you need to seek professional help.

The most confident cancer survivors find a middle ground where they don't ignore their chances or their potential symptoms, but they also don't let the worry of a recurrence run their lives. To get there, try a few different coping methods that will help you learn to live again while still staying smart about your future.

Learn Everything You Can—Some cancer survivors don't want to know their chances for a recurrence, preferring to deal with it if it comes but not stress over odds and probabilities in the meantime. However, it may actually help you sleep better at night if you know as much about your long-term prognosis as possible.

Talk with your doctor to learn what to expect in the days, months and years to come, and ask what potential symptoms might merit an unplanned follow-up visit. Ask what the statistics are, given your particular type of cancer, the level to which it progressed, your treatment regimen, your age and any other determining factors.

Find Support in Groups—Well-meaning family and friends may be willing to lend a shoulder, but unless they've been through the nightmare you've experienced firsthand, they can't be expected to really get it. However, other cancer survivors probably will. Your hospital or oncologist probably knows of a group that meets regularly to discuss the questions and fears that people have during and after cancer, and putting yourself in a community filled with others who can relate to what you've been through and where you are now may help you find peace more than anything else will.

If you're not comfortable discussing your private emotions in a larger setting, try to find at least one person with whom you can share your experience. Knowing that others may share your specific worries will help ease your stress, and perhaps together you can find some answers and solutions you might not have been able to come up with on your own.

Relax—Body, Mind and Soul—Let's face it: Stressing about cancer isn't going to decrease your chances of a recurrence. If you need help reducing your worries, consider some mind/body relaxation techniques. Many alternative medical practitioners and mainstream physicians alike agree that centering yourself—focusing your thoughts and targeting your breathing—is crucial in creating a peaceful mindset in which you can allow yourself to calmly let go of your worries.

Yoga (see page 54), a popular physical, mental and spiritual discipline, helps enhance both your physical and emotional well-being (check out www.yogabear.org). It's not a high-impact workout in

which you pound yourself into an aerobic frenzy, but it provides a similar endorphin rush that energizes you in a completely different sense. Since cancer (and life after it) can be as taxing on your emotions as it is on your body, the reflective atmosphere provided by a yoga session can be just as beneficial as your medical treatment regimen. Furthermore, the stretching and aligning provided by the different poses and the breathing techniques, in conjunction with your body's motions, can help keep you feeling your best.

Meditation also helps relax the mind but requires less physical agility than yoga. Studies have shown that it can alter metabolism, blood pressure, pulse rates, brain activation and other bodily functions. If you're new to meditation, it can be as simple as finding a quiet place free of distractions, sitting down and clearing your mind.

Don't Neglect Your Follow-Ups—As tempting as it seems to put this whole nightmare behind you, it's more important than ever to be responsible about your health. Having cancer once puts you at a higher risk of having it again, so heed your doctor's advice regarding follow-up appointments, regular tests and procedures, medication regimens, self-examinations and more. Should your cancer return, it will respond better to treatment with early detection. And the peace of mind you'll get from your doctor's regular thumbs-up will help sustain you in times of worry.

Be Prepared—Before you dump all the materials and products you collected along your journey, consider what resources you'll need if your cancer ever returns, either as a second round of your first diagnosis or as a new flare-up in a different part of your body. The most important resource to hang onto is your medical insurance. As you've learned firsthand, cancer is extremely expensive, and medical insurance will help you in the event of a huge and sudden expense as well as the long-term treatments following a new diagnosis.

You may decide to hang on to some of the items that helped you through your cancer ordeal, such as wigs, books and medical products, or you may choose to donate them to others, symbolizing the end of this period of your life.

One of the scariest things about cancer is not knowing whether you'll be able to go back to living the way that you did before, so now that it's gone, take this opportunity to live your life to its fullest potential.

"You can't walk around and always have your finger on your pulse," reasons Luke. "You have to have that mix. If you're always walking around obsessed with cancer coming back, you'll miss life."

Perhaps the best attitude comes from Lori Testa, a survivor of thyroid cancer who spent eight days in isolation during her treatment. "After [that quarantine], I quit worrying. I do the best I can. I do all my checkups on time. Other than that ... I have a bucket list I have to get done." ■ TBC