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Cancer's Silver Lining

BY DON VAUGHAN

Researchers call the positives of cancer post-traumatic growth, but survivors call them cancer's gifts.

Surviving cancer is seldom easy. Treatment can be painful, debilitating, emotionally draining, and financially taxing. And yet, despite it all, a surprising number of cancer survivors report finding a “silver lining” in their cancer experience.

This positive perspective, what researchers call “post-traumatic growth,” affects survivors in a variety of ways. From experiencing a spiritual awakening to becoming aware of inner strength, the silver lining often leads to dramatic life changes.

“My life and well-being were both significantly improved by cancer,” says fantasy novelist Jay Lake of Portland, Oregon, who was diagnosed with early-stage colon cancer at age 43 in April 2008. “In many ways, it was one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Richard G. Tedeschi, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, says Lake is among the estimated one-half to two-thirds of cancer survivors who come away from their experience with some kind of positive change.

Tedeschi, who has interviewed hundreds of trauma survivors, reports five common growth outcomes:

- > A deepened appreciation of life.
- > Enhanced relationships with others.
- > An appreciation for personal strength and endurance.
- > Setting out on new pathways or pursuing new interests and opportunities.
- > Spiritual growth and development.

“It’s always better if your suffering has some meaning to it,” Tedeschi says. “So if you perceive that it’s teaching you something or changing you in some positive way, there is a reason to keep going.”

[Don't Take Life for Granted](#)

Patricia Mumby, RN, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Loyola University Chicago and director of psychosocial oncology for the department of psychiatry at Loyola Medical Center, agrees that cancer can be life-altering.

“I think many of us often take life for granted, and a -diagnosis, such as cancer, can really make people look at their life and ask, ‘Am I living my life in a way that is most fulfilling to me?’ ” she explains. “They wonder, ‘Are there things I can change or improve?’ ”

After cancer, Lake found a much greater focus on his writing and his relationship with his 11-year-old daughter, whom he now spends more time with. “It’s easy to get caught up in both the ‘business’ and ‘busy-ness’ of life,” he says. “Adding a meaningful purpose requires sacrifices.”

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—Richard G. Tedeschi, PhD

Catherine Calame of Bayport, New York, was in a bad marriage when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in early 2002 at age 36. Then she learned that her husband was having an affair. As Calame completed her treatments, she entered counseling, where she discovered the strength to end her marriage and move forward.

“My ‘aha’ moment came when I was visiting a friend, and I just looked at her and said, ‘I’m done.’ There was no turning back,” she reports. “From cancer, I learned to take life one day at a time.”

Calame says she could focus more clearly on her personal goals, which included getting a full-time job and negotiating her divorce. “I now have the best life I could ever have hoped for,” she says.

On the other side of the coin, cancer can also help bring families closer together. Cindy Hecht was 45 and a divorced mom raising two daughters when she was diagnosed with aggressive non-Hodgkin lymphoma in December 2006. Hecht’s oldest daughter, Carolyn Suna, 14 at the time, immediately stepped in to care for both her mother and her then 9-year-old sister, Lauren.

“We have a deep understanding and appreciation for each other that we might not have had during these ‘hot-button years’ for mothers and daughters,” says Hecht. “I think Carolyn also learned a lot about the power of community as she watched our town and her friends’ parents jump in and help.”

Carolyn, now 17, says she learned that her mother is “one tough lady.” Even when she was bald or vomiting as a result of her therapy, Carolyn recalls that her

mother always tried to pretend that everything was fine.

Not everyone will find a silver lining in their cancer experience, of course. For some, it will be the most agonizing experience of their lives and not easily traversed. But Tedeschi says that patients can increase their chances of finding something positive by avoiding fearful thinking.

“Some people are just blown away emotionally, with a lot of worry, fear, and anger,” Tedeschi explains. “They have to somehow make the transition to thinking about their experience in a calmer, more deliberate way, so that they can see how it may be changing them. One way is to talk with someone who has already gone through a similar experience, or by joining a cancer support group.”



Carolyn Suna, at right, took care of her younger sister Lauren, during their mother Cindy Hecht's (background) lymphoma. Photo by Joseph Pregiato.

A Call to God

For Judy King of Pompano Beach, Florida, cancer brought a spiritual awakening. While receiving chemotherapy following her breast cancer diagnosis at age 35 in March 1994, King was casually examining a small blister on her foot when she was struck by the unique healing ability of the body.

King, who had been raised an agnostic, says this simple, yet profound realization helped transform her from an agnostic to believing in God.

“This transition gave me the ability to quit worrying about myself and my treatments and actually ‘let go and let God,’ ” King says. “When my friends ask me to tell them something positive about my cancer, I tell them that because of it, I found God, and I also got a few months’ reprieve from shaving my legs.”

Some survivors find their mission in life after cancer when they decide to become advocates for their fellow cancer patients. While in the hospital with a rare and aggressive form of cervical cancer in April 2008, 36-year-old Sarah Fisher of Phoenix, Arizona, became friends with her hospital roommate, Deborah, who had advanced cancer.

After Deborah’s death in early 2009, Fisher wanted to honor her late friend. So she founded Deb’s Day, a nonprofit organization that enlists salons and beauticians to provide personal care free of charge to seriously ill hospital patients.

“I believe my fight with cancer was actually a good cause, for without it I never would have met Deborah or founded Deb’s Day,” Fisher says.

Similarly, Robin Smalley, a former Hollywood producer and writer, felt compelled to help others after her experience with breast cancer in 2001, which was followed by two tragic events: Her mother died in her sleep at age 66; and then Smalley’s best friend, Karen Besser, died suddenly while undergoing simple shoulder surgery. The losses threw Smalley, 48 at the time, into depression.

Besser's brother, Mitch Besser, MD, a researcher at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, was working to help stop the mother-to-child transmission of HIV. He had begun mothers2mothers in 2001, but didn't know how to grow it into a viable organization. After Smalley visited Besser in Cape Town and met the women he was treating, she called her husband to say the family would be moving to South Africa to help make mothers2mothers a reality.

"Being around women who didn't have good fortune, as I did, yet who managed to face their HIV status with courage and spirit and a smile, now *they* were survivors," says Smalley. "In the wake of breast cancer, m2m gave me the perspective to look beyond my cancer and to be inspired by true courage. Their desire to rise above their circumstances to help others made me realize that I can do the same." The Smalleys stayed for more than a year and still visit frequently.

Stan Goldberg of San Francisco was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2002 at age 57, and, like Smalley, felt compelled to help others after his recovery. Since becoming a bedside hospice volunteer, he has been present for the deaths of more than 250 adults and children, experiences that, he says, have helped him learn to live fully, regardless of how long it might be. "When you are invited into the lives of people who are dying, there is an honesty in their words and behaviors that teaches you what it means to be authentically human."

Cancer patients should never think of the disease's potential silver lining as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, says Loyola's Mumby. "People can be feeling the stress of the cancer at the same time that they are able to find something positive," she says. "It's often a matter of degree. But I think if people are able, at any point in the experience, to identify even a single positive, that, in and of itself, can be very empowering."

Did cancer have a silver lining for you? Share your story at www.curetoday.com/messageboard/cancers_silver_lining.