

Mantra for a Healthy Survivor

Posted At : December 7, 2009 4:34 PM | Posted By : Guest Blogger

Related Categories: Survivorship, General

Lymphoma survivor Wendy Harpham, MD, is a writer and author of seven books on cancer survivorship.

"Live each day as if it is your last."

I have only one thing to say about this popular mantra among patients who have completed treatment: No thanks!

I understand their logic. Just as hunger is the best appetizer, the threat of loss can heighten all the senses in pleasurable ways. I remember the sensory feast when my diagnosis first forced me to face my mortality. Berries tasted sweeter. Music sounded richer. Skies looked bluer.

Why not embrace my current remission by living each day as if it is my last? Why not hold on to the outlook that enhances the beauty of everything in my little world? First, such an effort is an exercise in defeat. To maintain the urgency and intensity of a "last day" mentality would be exhausting, physically and emotionally.

Second, to live each day as if it is my last is to raise expectations about each outing and interaction, putting pressure on everyone and everything to be last-day worthy. Third (and most important to me), to live each day as if it is my last is to live without hopes for tomorrow. And I won't do that. Not before I am on my deathbed, anyway. You see, I am committed to being a [Healthy Survivor](#)," namely, a survivor who (1) gets good care and (2) lives as fully as possible. A central element of Healthy Survivorship is nourishing [hope](#). Every day I strive to accept my present situation *while hoping for a better tomorrow*.

Think about how it would affect "my care" if I were to live each day as if it were my last. I would stop taking my medications and stop going for checkups. Why bother? I would eat puffed Cheetos for breakfast, ice cream for lunch, and chocolate chip cookies for dinner. And I surely would not drag myself to the gym.

As for the "living fully" part of Healthy Survivorship, if I were to live each day as if it were my last, today's troubles would no longer have meaning. Instead of seeing my challenges and unpleasant emotions as part of my path to a better tomorrow, they would feel like nothing other than my miserable lot in life.

As I see it, a cancer diagnosis encourages us to know both the fragility and the hopes of life, and with that knowledge to live most fully. As a Healthy Survivor, instead of trying to live each day as if it was your last, try to seize the day--*carpe diem*. Choose to embrace today--whatever the circumstances--and find some happiness today while hoping for a better tomorrow.

Dr. Harpham coined the term "Healthy Survivor" while dealing with her recurring lymphoma. She discusses how to get good care and live as fully as possible on her

blog, Dr. Harpham on Healthy Survivorship (www.wendyharpham.typepad.com).
Learn more about her speaking, advocacy and writing at www.wendyharpham.com