

Session 10: Measure Success by Effort and Honor

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Measure success by effort and honor.

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Session 10: Measure Success by Effort and Honor

Introduction

CD 3, T5, 00:51/MP3 00:51

In this session, we're going to talk about Step 5 in our 7 Steps to Cancer Survivorship – *Measure Success by Effort and Honor*. This also happens to be one of *The 10 Tools of Triumph for Survivors*.

The Newspaper Story We've All Read

CD 3, T5, 01:04/MP3 01:04

The other day I came across a newspaper story very similar to ones I'm sure we've both read many times. The headline read: "*Man/Woman Loses Long Battle with Cancer.*" So I start reading. Way down in the twelfth paragraph, I discover that when the individual had been diagnosed, they'd been given six months to live. Yet they had maintained a high quality of life for six years! Now I ask you...Who won? *Who won?*

A Mother's Enlightened Perspective

CD 3, T5, 01:36/MP3 01:36

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty of New Delhi, India, was the mother of a courageous three-year-old boy. His name was Rahul. He lived bravely and sagely for months until he eventually died of an inoperable brain tumor. In a story his mother wrote in the online version of Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe & Mail*, Ranjani makes a vitally important point. She says that our culture would have us believe that if we try hard enough we can "beat cancer." And if we don't, we didn't try hard enough.

A second point she makes is that if we don't survive cancer, then we "lost," in addition to being deceased. She writes: "Surviving cancer isn't really a matter of guts and glory. It's about what type of cancer it is, where it is, how far advanced it is and how aggressive it is – all the rather practical stuff. We cling to the image of bravely fighting off cancer. We further solidify that image by seeking to idolize those who have 'won the battle.' Maybe we need to look for our heroes lower down in the stratosphere. Maybe heroes are inside each one of us and they come out only when they're forced to."

The Standard Measure of Success

CD 3, T5, 02:52/MP3 02:53

Just as Ranjani experienced, when it comes to cancer, we all know what the standard measure of success is. It's harshly narrow. It's that: *If we survive, we win, but if we die, well, we lose.* But what if we live and we're so emotionally traumatized and physically changed that we simply can't function in any meaningful way? What if we're so fatigued from treatment that we can't get out of bed? Or what if we survive but we lose our relationships and friendships while going through treatment and we emerge angry, alone and afraid?

Being Cured & Being Healed

CD 3, T5, 03:29/MP3 03:30

Breast cancer surgeon and integrative medicine specialist, Dr. Beth DuPree, whom we met in Session 9, points out that even if someone is cured, they may not necessarily be healed. *“If someone’s cured,” she says, “but they’re depressed and sitting in their kitchen with the lights off living in fear that their cancer will return, then they may have been cured but they’re not healed. For someone to be healed they have to be at peace in their heart.”*

Living But Still Losing

CD 3, T5, 03:57/MP3 03:56

I was cured of leukemia, but eventually I lost my marriage as a direct result of our cancer experience together. So did I win? Yes, I won back my life, but I lost my wife — not to cancer, but to the stresses that treatment put on our marriage.

Part of the problem, as I see it anyway, is that we’ve been taking an approach to this climb that I believe could be stronger. As we talked about in Session 3, the approach many of us have been conditioned to take with cancer has been combative and confrontational. We’re in a fight — a fight for our lives.

But there are a few weaknesses to that approach. The first is that fighting starts from fear, and fear starts from feeling threatened. There’s no question that we all feel threatened by cancer. But what we’re also threatened by is the fight itself. Why? Because, as we all know, in a fight there’s a winner and a loser. That sets us up for failure if we happen to end up on the losing side. It also sets us up for exhaustion because we’ve got to constantly “keep up the good fight” by staying ever-vigilant. We also have to constantly fight to keep up appearances that we’re still “a fighter.” Even if treatment isn’t going as well as we might like, we still intend to “beat this thing.” But could we really be beating ourselves in the process? Isn’t our objective to heal?

Survivor Hero to Zero

CD 3, T5, 05:18/MP3 05:18

I once worked with a survivor who successfully endured months of chemotherapy and the rigors of an adult blood stem cell transplant. But a few months later her cancer was back. She didn’t want to tell her friends and family because she felt she’d let them down. She didn’t even want to tell her children. In the eyes of the outside world, she’d fallen from survivor hero to zero.

What’s wrong with this picture? I think most of us would agree — a lot. It’s harsh, inhumane and insensitive. We’re all doing the best we can. Surely there’s honor in that. There’s also honor in the effort it’s taken to have climbed as high as we have to this point.

The “War” against Cancer

CD 3, T5, 06:05/MP3 06:05

A combative approach to cancer is so pervasive in our world that the words “fight” and “cancer” are practically synonymous. In fact, they now appear in the slogans and everyday lexicon of thousands of health and medical organizations worldwide. A simple search on the internet turns up close to 200 million results. When we fight, we expend energy. The challenge is that once we begin treatment, we have less energy. So we’ve got to be very careful about how we use that energy.

Fight or Flow

CD 3, T5, 06:38/MP3 06:38

During my treatment, rather than fight cancer, I chose to try to flow around it. When the nurses started my first round of week-long, 24-hour continuous infusion chemotherapy as an inpatient, I had a choice. I could see the chemo as bags of noxious chemicals that would burn their way through my body. Or, I could choose to look at chemo differently.

I chose to see chemo as clear white grape juice that would smoothly flow into me, do its work as powerful medicine and smoothly flow out. I was also diligent about taking my anti-nausea medication on time. The combined result was that I had very few adverse reactions to chemotherapy. How much of that was my mental mindset and how much of it was the anti-nauseants, I can’t say. Many other survivors do everything possible to prevent side effects during chemo, but they aren’t so lucky. Why’s that?

How I Chose to Look at Chemo

CD 3, T5, 07:33/MP3 07:34

How I chose to look at chemo was my way of flowing around cancer rather than fighting it. Because when we fight, we’re very quickly exhausted, but when we flow, we can take on the force of a river.

**When we fight, we’re very quickly exhausted.
When we flow, we can take on the force of a river.**

Leaving the Fight to the Physicians

CD 3, T6, 00:00/MP3 07:49

We can no more conquer cancer than we can conquer Mt. Everest. I didn’t conquer cancer. I didn’t “beat” it either. I was fortunate enough to survive it. So as I mentioned in Session 3, I think we need to leave “the fight” to our physicians. They can use their treatment weapons against the enemy in whichever way they think best. That’s *their* game. We need to stay focused on improving our health.

**We can no more conquer cancer than we can conquer Mt. Everest.
Leave “the fight” to our physicians.**

How to Triumph, Whatever the Outcome

CD 3, T6, 00:22/MP3 08:12

I'd like to suggest that we dismiss the idea that we're in a fight, a war, a competition, a match or a game. The cancer experience isn't about winning or losing. It's about something far more important than a conflict, a fight or a battle.

**The cancer experience isn't about winning or losing.
It's about something far more important than that.**

New Definition of Success

CD 3, T6, 00:41/MP3 08:31

When it comes to cancer, I think we need a broader and healthier measure of success, one that's actually meaningful – and most importantly, achievable. I'd like to suggest that in the case of cancer, attitude *isn't* everything.

In the case of cancer, attitude *isn't* everything.

As Ranjani pointed out, from a medical perspective, surviving cancer hinges on many factors. One factor is the type of cancer we have. Another, as she mentioned, is where it is in our bodies. Other factors are how far advanced it is, how fast it's spreading and what treatment methods exist, if any. If treatment methods do exist, we also need to consider how effective they are and if we can get access to the best ones. It's the role of our medical care partners to focus on those factors. Our job as survivors is to focus on those elements within our control. And we have no way of knowing if the decisions we make today will take us where we'd like to be tomorrow. We can only give it our best effort.

Our job as survivors is to focus on those elements within our control.

The Honor in Effort

CD 3, T6, 01:36/MP3 09:26

In my view, living with cancer has a lot to do with honor – honoring our emotions and honoring who we are and where we are on the climb. It's also about honoring our effort and the totality of that effort.

Mahatma Gandhi once wisely said, "*Total effort is total victory.*" In the context of cancer, that means that if we've given it our all, if we've done everything in our power to stay alive for as long as possible with as high a quality of life as possible, then there's no dishonor. By the same token, if we decide that we've had enough and we can find honor in our effort, we honor ourselves and we can be at peace with ourselves – whatever the outcome.

***"Total effort is total victory."
– Mahatma Gandhi***

Dr. Linda Carlson puts it this way: *“At some point we have to accept that we’ve done our best and let go of the outcome. There can be a sense of ease by not living in fear of death but just making the most of whatever time we have left, however long that is.”* And as Dr. DuPree says, even if we’re not cured, we can still experience some degree of healing if we can find some personal peace while we’re living with cancer. Acceptance isn’t giving up. It’s opening up.

Acceptance isn’t giving up. It’s opening up.

Quality & Quantity

CD 3, T6, 02:55/MP3 10:45

Regardless of our prognosis, the way we prevail is to put the quality of our lives first and the longevity of our lives second. What’s really important isn’t how long we live. It’s how *well* we live. And if you think about it, that’s all any of us are trying to do, whether we’ve been diagnosed with cancer or not. Ideally, we want to survive to thrive for a very long time. But if we survive without a high quality of life, is that really living or is it just enduring?

Our quality of life counts. In fact, when it comes right down to it, our quality of life and the quality and totality of our effort are some of the only things that count. And who determines when we’ve given it our all or we’ve had enough? We do – and no one else.

Our Choice When It Comes To Cancer

CD 3, T6, 03:43/MP3 11:33

We have a choice about how we answer to cancer. Do we live in anxiety and fear, fighting desperately for our lives, or do we live with quiet resolution, determination and commitment? When we get bad news, do we pack up our rope in depressed resignation, or do we work to try to maintain the highest quality of life possible for as long as possible? All answers are acceptable.

Our Answer to Cancer

CD 3, T6, 04:11/MP3 12:01

I say we answer with quiet courage. I say we give it everything we can to live with the highest quality of life that we can, for as long as we can, with as much dignity, equanimity and self-respect as we can. If that’s decades, we uphold our honor. If it’s days, we still uphold it.

