My Cancer Talk Primer

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There is an awful lot of cancer going around these days. Virtually everyone either has it or knows someone who does. Yet very few people actually know how to talk about it properly, by which I mean without offense, indifference, callousness or, often, plain old ignorance. That's why I've provided this handy set of terms for friends and family. Feel free to share it!

Cancer: It's not a competition, but this word means pretty much the worst thing that can happen to a person. It is a complicated disease that is not especially well understood. It can travel under assumed identities, including "the Emperor of All Maladies," as it is a disease that thinks pretty highly of itself.

Warrior: Americans love to make war on all kinds of things, and cancer is no exception. And while anyone with cancer is certainly in a battle for her or his life, there is not a whole bunch that the cancer warrior can actually do. A duel? Swords? Pistols? The body might be more aptly described as the battleground, but that seems too passive for our combative culture.

Survivor: Another hotly debated term. Some people choose to use it because they are still around to do so. Others prefer not to self-describe this way, in part because the term suggests that one has outlasted cancer. For many of us, however, that is not really possible. We may be surviving, but that damn cancer is right there along with us.

Endurer: Similar to survivor, but for many, a more accurate description. We haven't triumphed over cancer, but we are getting along with it—for the time being. I "borrowed" this term from my friend Rudy Fischmann and his Brain Cancer Diaries on YouTube—definitely check it out!—but I think it will catch on with cancer-ites everywhere.

Chemotherapy: Often called simply "chemo"—a kind of nickname, as if we were friends (which we most definitely are not)—this anticancer treatment involves taking poison to kill off cells that are already trying to kill you. It is akin to gambling—which will kill the patient first? Sometimes chemo can actually give one cancer, which really seems unnecessarily redundant and a big waste of time.

Radiation: Sometimes poison just isn't enough, so we go right for the big guns and try to nuke

that tumor out of existence.

Chemo brain: This is an understudied, misunderstood phenomenon in which chemo causes one to forget certain things. It’s not really surprising, given that chemo is poisoning one’s cells rather indiscriminately. In my case, those certain things often involve requests to do chores around the house, such as taking out the garbage.

CBD: Pot with the fun parts removed and of debatable efficacy. But if it helps, why not?

Green tea: See CBD regarding efficacy, but even less fun.

Healthy diet and more exercise: These are great! They also don’t cure cancer!

This is a far from complete list. Thus, if something is not covered above and family members or friends are uncertain, remind them of this simple rule: Silence is golden.

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