Changing My Mind

When therapist Clare Reed, of Dublin, was diagnosed with breast cancer, she used her therapeutic skills to change her own life.

September 16, 2019 By Clare Reed

As a therapist specializing in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) since 2008, I help people gain control of their minds to develop actionable plans for their lives. But it wasn't until I got cancer that I diligently used these techniques on myself. It was 2017. I was 42. The diagnosis was triple-negative breast cancer—the hardest type to treat. Treatment included a partial mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Google, with its scary stats, didn't help.

We who have experienced cancer can go down one of two cognitive paths. We can look inward and get anxious, worry, fret and feel angry, sad and depressed. Or we can choose to look outward and see, hear, view, taste and experience life for as long as we get to be on the planet. That's the way of the pragmatist, choosing to live each day and just be.

But it's not always easy.

The hardest part? Coping with other people's mindsets. My friends and family were mostly in the "you can beat this" and "you are so strong; if anyone can, you can" camp.

I don't have anything against their cheerleading style. It works for many people. But not for me. That mental approach makes me feel like I am going to war. It kicks off adrenaline and cortisol just at the moment I need to feel calm.

I feel strongly that keeping those stress hormones at bay contributes to cancer recovery.

As a pragmatist, I have never felt at war with my body. Instead, I love my whole body, and I take the view that what will be, will be. The truth is, a stressful lifestyle was part of my problem. I had been working so hard for over a decade—I thought I could work 12 hours a day. But every year made me more burned out. The last thing I needed was to feel more stress "fighting" my cancer.

Instead, I cut my working hours down to 10 client sessions per week. My partner and I bought a place in the countryside, away from the city pollution. Here, I garden, growing organic, nutritious vegetables.

This move helped with my new no-alcohol lifestyle too while I give back to my body all that I took

away from it over the last decade.

I’m now a CBT cancer coach (CBTforCancer.com), helping my clients achieve calm, preserve self-esteem and learn behavioral techniques to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

I don’t know the outcome of my story, but I do know that I am looking after myself. I am five months into recovering from a brain operation to remove a second tumor and the accompanying radiation, and I feel great. I had a clear full-body scan recently too. All through the treatment, my doctors were surprised at my “laid-back” attitude. I even got told off by an oncologist for “not taking my diagnosis seriously. ” I think he wanted tears and hysterics. I don’t believe he knows what a pragmatist is!

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