

A Liberating Lesson for Cancer Survivors

“Do you fear something awful might happen?” asks Adam Hayden, 40, a writer and speaker with brain cancer who lives with his wife and three sons in Indianapolis.

September 11, 2023 By [Adam Hayden](#)

The Palliative Care office at Eskenazi Hospital is tucked neatly between Senior Care and Optometry on the sixth floor. Checking in at the front desk, I am asked, “Optometry?” “Palliative Care,” I reply. I am handed a clipboard and directed to door D. I glance while I walk to see “Senior Care” in narrow sans serif font mounted in sharp black text on the clean, white walls. I was diagnosed with brain cancer at 34 years old; meanwhile, the median age of diagnosis is 64.

I can’t help but grin, sitting in the Senior Care waiting area.

A few questions into an anxiety questionnaire I’m given to complete, I snort with laughter. The GAD-7 asks the survey respondent to circle the answer, ranging from “Not at all” to “Nearly every day,” corresponding to the prompt: “Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen.”

Something awful might happen? Something awful did happen! I have terminal cancer!

“Most people with cancer feel like something awful might happen, so we take that into account when scoring,” my mental health professional reported while I took at least half of our first session to provide the director’s cut commentary to my anxiety and depression questionnaire.

Afraid that something awful might happen is the lens through which many of us cancer patients probably see the world. It’s not fear exactly, more like an evolutionary adaptation. Fitness for survival when surviving cancer is “hope for the best and plan for the rest.”

Things started to make sense for me following a recent stable MRI scan. It took me a while to share that news with anybody outside my close circle. And don’t get me wrong, it’s good news! So why was it so tough for me to let it out? What’s the big deal about throwing up a quick Facebook post, and we can all move on with our lives?

The difficulty with me sharing the news of my stable scan lies in what I’ve just said: “We can all move on with our lives.” The harshest (but most liberating) lesson that each cancer patient must learn—bigger than that, the lesson taught to all when we have the good sense to pay close

attention to our mortality—is that brutal and freeing truth: Life moves on.

The liberation comes through acceptance that our friends, family, jobs, soccer clubs and microbreweries don't depend on us for their survival—even for their success and joy. That all are sad in our passing is expected. The liberation comes when we choose to be passionate and powerful in the present moment because, with or without us, life moves on. When we accept that, and I mean truly get it deep in our bones, we don't just share the good news, we sing it.

See, the fear that something awful might happen is the future uncertainty we must contend with. The what-could-be has robbed us of the what-is. The possible is a thief of the present. This has all been hard to see, but thankfully, I'm neatly tucked in between Senior Care and Optometry.

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