

Meet the Luckiest Unlucky Person With Metastatic Breast Cancer

Kristin Smith Westbrook's "practical memoir" covers meditation, metastatic breast cancer, grief, Calm City and much more.

March 11, 2024 By [Trent Straube](#)

To help cope with the stress of her demanding job and life as a creative director in New York City, Kristin Smith Westbrook began meditating in 2001. Nine years later, the practice became a lifeline of sorts when she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, resulting in "12 rounds of chemotherapy, a handful of surgeries, 28 radiation treatments and over 250 infusions of chemotherapy and immunotherapy medication," as she writes in the introduction to her 2023 memoir, [The Luckiest Unlucky Person I Know](#). Throughout her own health challenges, Westbrook also had to navigate the unexpected grief of losing a stepson to mesothelioma, a rare lung cancer. The book offers not just her personal story but also exercises and advice that can help readers deal with their own adversities. (Check out one of the exercises in our [Solutions column](#).)

In 2017, Westbrook launched Calm City, a mobile meditation studio—not unlike the food trucks in urban centers—that she and her team take to health fairs, Fortune 500 companies, universities and government agencies. They also offer trainings and online classes—Westbrook provided workshops at the recent [Young Survival Coalition](#) Summit, teaching self-care techniques to breast cancer survivors.

Cancer Health spoke with Westbrook for our Can Heal column—that life-affirming declaration is right there in our title, Cancer Health—and we hope our discussion will help you do just that.

Kristin Smith Westbrook in her mobile studio

Courtesy of Kristin Smith Westbrook/ILatonya Davis

First off, how do you define meditation, and what drew you to it?

I use Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition: paying attention on purpose. That just means you are observing and watching, and you're doing it purposefully. A lot of times when we're walking down the street, we're thinking about things 10 years from now or 10 years ago. We're not here. We're thinking, What am I going to do when I get home?

I started meditation and exploring different ways of thinking because I was pretty miserable. I didn't know how to operate in the world. I was reactive and depressed and lonely. And then I realized my thoughts were creating my emotions, not the other way around, and that I could change my thoughts. [Through meditation and yoga] you also get self-awareness and self-discovery.

Kristin Smith Westbrook's mobile studio

Courtesy of Kristin Smith Westbrook

How did that help you deal with cancer?

Because of the meditation practices, I was able to be more in the moment. I saw myself running down into the [fearful what-ifs of the] future and I thought, I can't do that. I have to be here. That's when I learned "Stay on the step you're on." So many times in this process, I've gone into the future worrying about what will happen, and then that thing never happens, and the thing I'm afraid of and the story I create about that thing never really pan out the way I think—especially when getting a scan [for cancer]. Sometimes I'll say to myself, "You want to freak out? OK, you've got five minutes. Do it." And then I have to get back to this process of keeping my vibration up. Because once you go under the covers, that's it. Your thoughts have to go in the direction that you want to be going. If you keep thinking negative things, then you're going to get in a negative place. I'm not saying I don't have negative thoughts. I do. I had to work hard to be more positive. I always say, "Do you want to buy those thoughts? No. I'm not buying those."

Meditation can also be helpful during scans and doctor's visits, right?

Meditation has helped me immensely in that practical way because you get used to sitting still and being still. A lot of us are fidgety. I taught myself to not do that. I first learned to meditate by focusing on counting breaths. It's a very easy way in. I tell that to folks who don't know how to

meditate because they think they have to clear their minds, and it's very hard for them. But the counting process helps. It gives you something to latch on to. In the scan and during radiation, it really helps. When I did one of my radiations, it was like a laser beam, and you're in a mold, and they clamp it down. I had to employ all these practices and stay still in my mind as well as my body. Counting helps.

Was there any advice you received that was particularly helpful?

When I was first diagnosed, I couldn't figure out how this happened to me. I was so confused. I met these girls through the Young Survival Coalition, and one said to me, "You have to listen to Tara Brach" [a psychologist, author and Buddhist meditation teacher] who gives talks, and you can listen to her podcasts for free. She has some incredible wisdom and wrote a book called *Radical Acceptance*. I started to understand that this is what I am and where I am. She also has a practice called RAIN, which stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate and Nurture. For example, I would be like, OK, these thoughts and emotions are happening—I'm freaked out or pissed off—so I'm going to recognize them and allow them. Then investigate why this happens and nurture myself.

Was meeting other young breast cancer survivors helpful?

It was a game changer. When I first got diagnosed, I already had a close group of friends, but I couldn't relate to them at that time [because they didn't have cancer]. I also didn't want to be the friend who was crying all the time with them. I'm still friends with many of the young survivors today.

Why write a memoir?

When you go to the doctor—and I've been going to an oncologist every three weeks for the past 13 years—they're like, "Do you have diarrhea, vomiting, pain, etc." It's never, "How are you doing?" I needed practical advice for my mental health. That's why I wrote the book. There's a lot of advice on how to live your best life—like, do yoga and meditate—but not a lot of advice on how to live your best life when you're in the middle of your worst nightmare.

Finally, can you leave us with an inspiring quote or mantra that has stayed with you?

I love Wayne Dyer, who wrote *Your Erroneous Zones*, the 1970s bestseller in the self-help field. He helped me [via] his quote: "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change."

When my stepson passed away, I was looking for books on grief, and I grabbed *You Are Here* by Thich Nhat Hanh, who was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. One lesson from that book is to have compassion for yourself and others. The mantra he had was: "Dear one, I am here for you." When I wake up in the middle of the night, freaked out in grief and fear, I just repeat that over and over. And for others too. If I notice someone else is in pain or scared, I might not say that out loud, but I might feel that. It's such a tender way to approach yourself.

Editor's note: It is with great sadness that we report that Kristin Smith Westbrook died on February 29, 2024. She was a brave, kind and caring person, who inspired many others through her work. [Click here](#) to read her obituary.

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