

This Triathlete and Cancer Survivor Teaches You How to Rewrite the Story of Your Life

In her book “Finding a Way,” champion triathlete, horse rescuer and leukemia thriver Siri Lindley gives you tools to triumph.

September 11, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

“Siri, you have acute myeloid leukemia with a genetic mutation that is going to make this very complicated to treat.” Thus, Siri Lindley, 53, learned she had cancer in 2019 when blood work for a hip replacement surgery led to the unexpected diagnosis. What happened next is extraordinary. She flipped the script on this life-threatening disease. Her treatment regimen included chemotherapy, radiation and a bone marrow transplant as part of two clinical trials (much of it during the COVID-19 pandemic), but she viewed the challenge as an opportunity for growth. To our great benefit, she documented it all in her self-help book *Finding a Way: Taking the Impossible and Making It Possible*.

“All the tools I used to get me through the darkest times in my life, I am now going to give to you,” she writes in the introduction. Part memoir, part workbook—it includes questionnaires and assignments—the book teaches you how to recognize the stories you tell yourself that hold you back, causing pain, suffering and fear.

Lindley knows about overcoming obstacles and motivating others. She's a world-champion triathlete and coach who has also battled anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the closet (she's a proud gay woman and LGBTQ advocate today but initially faced challenges coming out to herself and family).

With her wife, Rebekah Keat, Lindley founded and runs Believe Ranch and Rescue, a horse rescue program in Colorado. Horses are key to Lindley's healing process, as she explains in this interview, which has been edited for clarity and length.

Our discussion marks the debut of the column Can Heal—that life-affirming declaration is right there in the title of this magazine, Cancer Health—and we hope the column will help you do just that.

You advise people to be aware of negative self-talk and to craft more helpful narratives. How did you apply this, for example, to cancer treatment?

I kept thinking, This chemotherapy is part of what's going to save my life. If I went in hating it and thinking it was poison, that didn't feel healing to me.

I also had a massive phobia about vomiting. It was debilitating. If I saw someone vomit, it would put me into a panic attack for hours. And then I get this cancer, and I'm vomiting like 70 times a day. I had a friend, Tony Robbins's wife, who said, "Siri, it's all about reframing. What if every time you throw up, you know your body is releasing something that shouldn't be inside, that you're getting one step closer to surviving." That simple reframe didn't make it easier, but it allowed it to not completely devastate me.

In the hospital, when things were so bad, as soon as I started thinking of things I could appreciate—I have a roof over my head; I have health insurance; my mom is sleeping there on the couch—I felt a little bit better. And these are things you can do when lying in bed and so sick.

When I was given this diagnosis, my wife's reaction and my doctor's tone of voice were like, "This is the end." But if I gave it that meaning, then how was I going to show up?

I remember the statement "What if what you're going through now is preparing you for what you asked for?" What if, in the process of me taking on this disease and finding a way to survive it, I learn things about me and about life, and I develop different skills, and that allows me to live my mission and purpose?

What is your purpose in life?

Before I got sick, I had found my freedom from anxiety and the freedom to be authentically me. I found the love of my life, and I had my father back. I found my freedom after all the suffering, and I wanted to help others find the way to be free of the stuff that holds them back. And then I get sick.

Did other mental tricks help you through?

The biggest thing I did every single day, just lying in that hospital bed, was create [an empowering vision]. The vision was me running up my favorite mountain trail, strong and healthy. And using all five senses—because this is what makes it so powerful—I'd imagine feeling the sun and warmth on my cheeks and the cool breeze in my hair. I'd hear my wife cheering me on. I'd smell the wildflowers, and I'd get to the top—I'm cancer-free! And in those moments, no matter how sick I was, I felt healthy and strong and alive. Your mind doesn't know if you are imagining this or if it's for-real happening. But I felt that, if I could see that vision every single day, then I was manifesting this—this is where I'm heading.

And a year to the date of my bone marrow transplant, I ran that trail—this is going to make me [pauses] cry—I ran that favorite mountain trail, and I'm telling you it was exactly as I had seen it in

my mind. Every part. I remember crying tears of gratitude at the top and thinking, This is the stuff I need to share. This is the stuff people need to be doing.



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A post shared by Siri Lindley (@sirilindley)

You have a chapter titled “The Power of the Unexpected Teacher,” and your example is Savannah, your horse. How did she help you heal?

When I got back from the hospital, I was 25 pounds lighter than today, and I was still really sick. They allowed me to come home because it was during COVID, and I was getting depressed. Typically, when I would ride Savannah, before I even get my feet in the stirrups and balance myself, she takes off. But this time, I get on top of her, and she takes these tiny little steps, like two inches. She has never done that before. She was saying, “You’re still vulnerable and weak, so this is what we’re going to do today.” Each week, I’d ride her a little bit. About six to eight months after my transplant, I get on her this one day, and before I have my feet in the stirrups, she takes off, and I’m like, “Whoa,” all terrified. And then as we calmed down, I get a phone call saying I’m cancer-free. It was her way of saying you are no longer weak. That’s one of the hardest parts once you get cancer-free: living with the fear of it coming back, needing to protect yourself. I was very much in that space, and this was her way of saying, “It’s time to start living again.” That was like a wake-up call. I can’t live the rest of my life worrying about this happening again.

In summary, what’s your top-line advice for someone diagnosed with cancer?

No. 1: Give this an empowering meaning that will not make you feel like a victim or weak or

unlucky. And think about other lessons: Are you going to learn how to receive help?

When I got sick, I felt this strong message to release anything inside that causes dis-ease [meaning “lack of ease”]—whether that was anger or resentment toward someone who hurt me. So it’s taking a personal inventory. What’s some of the stuff you must let go of? There was a lot of forgiveness—for myself and others. I wanted to sweep out my soul to make room for the healing to move through me.

The message on the other side of this is: I’m going to positively believe each person is going to make it, and there is an extraordinary gift that will reveal itself and will impact your life for the better, so keep your eyes open for that. You’ll realize how much people love you, and, even though you complained about it, you’ll realize how much you love your life.

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