Cancer Around the Holidays

Just because I look quite healthy does not mean that I am. To quote my oncologist prior to commencing chemo, “You had no idea how sick you were.”

November 13, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

With the holiday season bearing down on us too soon yet again, those of us fighting cancer face the unenviable proposition of having countless uncomfortable discussions with well-meaning, but often completely tone-deaf, friends and, worse still, relatives about our health — or lack thereof. In light of these dreaded encounters, the following list of basics about my cancer is mandatory reading for anyone who may be breaking a wishbone with me or thinking of offering me anything with pumpkin in it.

1. Appearances are deceiving.

Cancer is not a disease most readily identified by cursory inspection. Particularly cancers such as mine, which is primarily hanging out in my blood, are not apparent unless I accidentally cut myself while carving the bird (a distinct possibility) and someone nearby happens to have an electron microscope at the ready. (Given some people I know, this is also a distinct possibility.) But just because absent an impaling I look quite healthy does not mean that I am. To quote my oncologist prior to commencing chemo, “You had no idea how sick you were.”

2. No second guessing.

Few things are more frustrating after living with — and worrying about — my cancer for over six years than to have someone suggest that I had been going about it all wrong. Besides the fact that this information would have been more timely if given to me prior to deciding upon treatments, the reality that such a view is coming out because “a friend of a friend knows a doctor” tends to carry little weight with me.

3. “Rah rah sis boom blah.”

Admittedly, it is often hard to know what to tell someone who has an illness as troubling and serious as cancer. In those cases, I strongly recommend not saying something just to fill air time. Yes, silence is uncomfortable for all of us, but it’s bested (worsted?) by the even longer and more awkward silence that will befall us all if some vapid words are uttered such as, “Don’t worry; it will all be fine” or “You’ve got this!”

4. War stories.

I know I am not the only person in the world with cancer. And I happen to be lucky enough to know

many of them (some of whom helped me compile this list!). With that in mind, I do not really need to hear about someone else I have never met — nor likely ever will — that has cancer, especially if that person is faring poorly. I have enough nightmares as it is. No need to share someone else's with me. Besides, it's not a competition to see who has it the worst. (How would you even determine the winner?)

5. No valet service.

Every person approaches one with cancer with their own baggage in tow — fear of cancer, terror of pain, inability to contemplate mortality. But their baggage should not impact how I have to deal with them. Nor is it my responsibility to make them feel better about my condition. In other words, check your own luggage.

6. It's not my diet.

Just because I may have to unbuckle my belt at the end of the evening on the fourth Thursday in November does not mean I normally eat 12,000 calories in a single sitting. Sometimes, yes; but not generally. And even if I did, it would not be the cause of my cancer. I know it terrifies people that one can get cancer without any identifiable reason, but that is just how it goes. Blaming it on other things will not change that reality. So have some more pie!

7. Leave the "doctoring" to the doctors.

When I learned I would have to start chemo, some members of my family were, understandably, in denial. Not only did I look "fine" (well, as fine as a balding, bespectacled, gangly 45-year-old can look), but of course it forced my loved ones to accept the reality of my cancer. That is hard. Really hard. Believe me, I know. But like so many other items on this do-not-say list, wishing it were otherwise won't make it so. Consequently, uttering a phrase such as "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" when learning that the oncologists are insisting on chemo is not especially helpful. As my wife — who actually is a doctor — so eloquently put it, "Oh, you're broke, all right."

8. Long-term rental.

Cancer is frequently not just a passing interloper in one's body. It so often takes up a long-term residency, sometimes permanent. This is particularly true for those of us with a "chronic" cancer, which is a euphemism for incurable. Even if the cancer one is stuck with is technically curable, the fear of its recurrence — or some other cancer — is unavoidable. Thus, just because one may technically be cancer-free or in remission currently, the specter of its return is always with us.

9. Dressing vs. stuffing.

Admittedly, this has nothing to do with cancer. Nonetheless, people should know that it's called "stuffing" when it is put inside the turkey — i.e., stuffed. Otherwise, it is referred to as dressing. Plus, it might actually have a relevance for those of us with cancer if you tell us it's dressing, but it's really stuffing — and it is therefore more likely to be laced with salmonella, something that is suboptimal for cancer-ites. Remember: words matter.

Author’s Note: This piece was originally published on The Mighty and can also be read there in its entirety at https://themighty.com/2019/11/what-i-wish-family-understood-cancer-and-the-holidays/ .

This post originally appeared on It’s in My Blood. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/cancer-around-holidays