

Cancer Grief and Survivor's Guilt

Sometimes bad things happen, but not talking about it doesn't make it go away. I try to celebrate the positive amid the hurt.

August 28, 2023 By [Dann Wonser](#)

Friends and Family,

I avoid negativity. I try to be uplifting to other people through my blog and personal connections. I do the same for my own benefit because we could all use more realistic positivity. But sometimes bad things happen, and not talking about them doesn't make them go away.

Even meditation doesn't help sometimes.

I just lost a friend to lung cancer. I've known Helen for almost five years through our local survivors' group that meets every month. She was a good human being who cared about others, worked for causes greater than herself, and fought like hell to stay alive. It hurts so much to lose her. Nine months ago, we lost Dawn, and I still think about her almost every day. I do a double take every time I see a picture of her daughter Nikki on Facebook because I see so much of Dawn in her.

A couple of years before that there was Carla, and before that Lyn. There have been others I'm afraid I can't remember, but chemo brain still causes me memory problems. And there are many other friends from everywhere else whom I have also lost to lung cancer. Yet despite all the losses that pile up, I hope that you, too, can find a local survivor group to be a part of. The reason it hurts so much to lose these people is because of how much they all meant to me, because of how much I benefited from being with them. It has been worth the hurt.

One of the reasons many elderly people get depressed is that they outlive the people they care about, so they are in a near-constant state of grief. It's like that with lung cancer, except it doesn't matter what age you are, and we lose people faster. Knowing we may also have to say goodbye one day makes it harder to get close to people with the disease.

But I keep trying, keep reaching out. My world is richer – and I'm a better person – because of each of these people, and the pain is tempered by the good memories. And I'm convinced that every one of them lived better, richer, longer lives because they were part of our community. That brings some solace.

Early on, I struggled with survivor's guilt. Why should I get to live while another person, perhaps one more worthy than me, doesn't?

This is something I struggled with for years before my therapist pointed out the obvious: "So you think that this is a zero-sum game? That because you're alive, someone else isn't? That you're taking their place?" I thought about this, along with something else he said that was thought-provoking: "Maybe it's the opposite. Maybe because you live longer, you inspire others to live longer, too." I think he's right. I think that's a good part of why I write my blog.

I had my scan last week, and the cancer is stable. I'm going to celebrate that, even as I think about the losses, because that's how we make it through this.

Love,

Dann

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