A Few COVID-19 Tips, From Someone Who's Had a Lot of Practice Living With Uncertainty

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May 28, 2020 By Lindsay Norris

To find yourself in a new world, equipped with its own language and rules that completely change your daily life is overwhelming and scary to say the least- you start to wonder how you'll even begin to move forward from such a major shift. I've noticed myself feeling all these fears and more recently as news of the COVID-19 crisis started to develop and stop the world in its tracks. I couldn't help but notice these feelings felt very familiar and I immediately shifted to my cancer coping methods that I've gotten pretty darn good at these last 3+ years. Here are a few of those life lessons that might help you as we all get through these next weeks and months.

You Don't Have a Choice

Let's get the harsh one out of the way first, none of us have an opt-out option here. You don't have a choice. This virus is here and it doesn't care who you are. It's changed your life (nearly overnight) and there's nothing anyone can do to change that fact. So, now that that's been said, what you do from now on is what matters. I spent a lot of energy at first wondering why I got cancer and focusing on the bad luck of it all. It didn't matter how long I obsessed about the months leading up to my diagnosis or all the signs and symptoms, it didn't change the fact that I had cancer. When we can accept the crisis is real, that's when you can start healing and moving onward. That's when you take the control back.

The First Few Weeks Suck the Most

Adjusting to these drastic changes we're all facing are going to take some time, especially when new information and updates are coming at us constantly. Just know that, even though the road ahead is very long and ominous, after the first few weeks pass we will have a much better idea of what this looks like and we can settle into our new routine. Being newly diagnosed with colorectal cancer, I remember the first weeks being a tornado of tests, exams, and information overload. It can feel like such a spiral. I felt so much peace after the first diagnostic phase had passed and I had started treatment- I felt like I was finally doing something to fight back...we'll be feeling like that soon since we're locking down in our homes and getting serious about this crisis.

You’re Allowed to Grieve

There is a lot about this new way of living that is so so tough, and I know it’s brought so much disappointment. Missed trips, canceled birthday parties, lost salaries, loss of independence, the list is endless. I remember grieving this exact list and wondering how life would look during cancer treatment. It doesn’t just change your life, it has a ripple effect to all of those around you. Allowing myself to be sad about the stuff that I was going to miss out on helped me to move on from it. Acknowledge this sucks—and things will be different for a while…and march onward! Decide if these things are happening to you, or for you. Focusing on the things you can control is one of the oldest tricks in the book—and it works in this situation well.

Don’t Look Too Far Ahead

Especially when I was first diagnosed, I would feel the most anxious when I let myself think too far ahead into a future that was full of uncertainty. I had an infant, toddler, and husband at home and no clue what was laying ahead for us. I started having visions of them growing older without me, of my husband alone wondering if he can juggle it all, of a long painful ending. I quickly learned that allowing my mind to wander that far ahead was unhealthy and didn’t help me in my current fight. I don’t know what things will be like a month from now, three months from now, or a year from now—but I know that stressing about that distracts me from today (I guess you could say we’re going into the unknowwnnnn—sorry, anyone else watching Frozen II on repeat with your kids?). When there is so much uncertainty- the best thing is to do everything you can today in this moment to keep moving onward…and you’re going to wake up and do that same thing tomorrow.

Trust the Experts

Wow, there are lots of opinions out there and it’s impossible to filter through. Early on in my cancer experience, I had a pretty intense conversation with my oncologist and was near breakdown trying to become an expert on everything regarding colorectal cancer. I wanted the stats, numbers, graphs, percentages, articles, all of it—I was reading enough to make my head spin. He stopped me and simply said “do you trust me.“ I started crying and said “yes, of course I do.” In that moment I realized that he was the one that has dedicated his life to knowing all of this, and there were just some things I had to let him be in charge of. I live my life believing that people are innately good- and I have to believe our community and medical leaders want the best outcomes for all of us during this health crisis. I choose to watch and read trusted sources only—and when I can tell the over saturation of info is making me feel anxious, I limit the time I allow myself to dedicate to it. Follow the science on this one #flattenthecurve.

Be Flexible

There will be more surprises, and plans will change; it’s just the nature of a traumatic event. We’ve already seen that play out this week. This current situation we’re in is still very fluid and ongoing, recommendations and restrictions are changing by the hour. Cancer treatment was similarly unpredictable. I even tell my patients, the only thing predictable about cancer is that it’s unpredictable. I know that’s not the most calming statement, but I’ve found that expecting things to continue to shift and change helps me prepare and accept things more easily as they come. I

had delays in chemo, surprise hospitalization, medications changes and more- you have to adjust and move forward. The biggest adjustment for all of us right now has to be the strict social distancing/ shelter in place, just remind yourself what you're doing this for. I'm staying home for my patients, for my fellow nurses who are still working bedside (and I know there's a very real possibility more of us will be called up), for all the other healthcare workers who are making huge sacrifices, for the elderly, for the immunocompromised and chronically ill, for the kids who's school lives are much safer than their home lives, the list goes on. The quicker we tighten down and do this the right way, the more we can protect those who need us now. I'm OK with that.

It's Not a Contest

Do not allow yourself to compare your current situation to others because it won't change it. This was and still is such a big hurdle for me— comparing my cancer stage, type, prognosis, course of treatment, etc was mentally exhausting and unhelpful. I realized early on that there will always be someone who has it "easier" and someone who has it "harder"—and I also realized that is only my perspective and I have no idea what else that person has going on. So if you're looking at someone else feeling jealous that their job situation is better through this, or they're much better at organizing their time at home with their perfect quarantine crafts—just know that you never know the full story, and it still doesn't change your situation. Focus your energy on that. And while you're at it, maybe do something nice for someone who has it harder than you right now (I see you service industry friends).

You Can't Pick and Choose

Just like with treatment for cancer- the solution to the COVID crisis seems to be multi-factorial, and we all have to commit completely. You can't work from home but still meet your friends for game night. You can't keep your kids home from childcare but still let them go to sleepovers. Just like I couldn't agree to radiation, but just one week. Or just like I couldn't agree to surgery but refuse chemotherapy. We have to commit to doing all we can to save each other, and we have to commit to every part of it. I know how bad you're craving normalcy right now- it was the hardest thing for me to give up, but the best thing for us all to do now is act that we have the virus and distance yourself as much as possible. Say it with me, "I HAVE THE CORONA VIRUS."

Other Life Doesn't Stop for This

Unfortunately, when trauma or tragedy strike, our other problems don't automatically wash away. Some problems could lurk in the background waiting for COVID to step to the back burner again, while others will be exponentially worse because of it. When something so big like cancer or our current crisis happens, it's hard to figure out how it fits in our list of existing stressors. The best thing I found to do is not make life stop for it—give those other things some energy as you can (even though that will look differently for a while) instead of ignoring them and waiting for them to blow up. Baby steps can be so impactful—you can do hard things! And to those who have had a recent loss, major illness, or other trauma right before the COVID crisis—I am so sorry that this is all you're seeing and hearing about when you're still hurting and lost. It pains me that many of you are suffering alone due to these new restrictions. We have not forgotten you, we love you.

Be Honest With Your Kids

They can handle it, I promise. They know something big is going on—their little lives have already been uprooted and they undoubtedly have questions. They miss their teacher, friends, and they are confused why our routine has abruptly stopped. When we were telling our kids about my cancer, we used the correct words and gave them honest (age appropriate) information…and we're doing the same now during COVID. Kid's want to be included, and their imaginations can run wild if they're filling in the blanks. That being said, of course you know your kids and what they need, my kids both happen to thrive on details and information to make them feel safe. I can promise you that all kids will happy to accept the extra snuggles and love at home—use this time to make them feel safe—when things level off let's learn some stuff too…but first, just love them.

Look for the Good

Spending time with family and friends is going to look differently for a while- but look at all the creative and beautiful things people are doing to stay connected already. People are doing drive by parades to celebrate birthdays and our teachers, using video messaging for happy hour for friends, to catch up and decompress, and creating larger online communities to share the best part of ourselves to inspire others. Hospitals are connecting with each other and sending words of encouragement. Artists are sharing their talents online for free, streaming concerts, and providing our kids with enriching content. And I know you've cracked a smile at at least one meme. When I was in treatment and severely neutropenic, or stuck in the hospital, I learned to stay connected with those I love in new ways- and my support system fed me, cared for me and my family, sent me cards, handmade gifs, and more—it was impossible not to see the beauty that had emerged. Send letters, check on a friend you haven't talked to in a while, drop a surprise treat off at a neighbor's doorstep, and don't forget to connect with yourself and practice your self-care. The good stuff is there, look for it.

Give Yourself (and Others) Some Grace

This is stressful for everyone, and the stinker about that is we all deal with it in different ways and at different paces. Thankfully (or unthankfully), my husband and I have had plenty of experience dealing with trauma together. You just have to give yourself some time and grace, and give those around you the same patience and understanding—especially since many of us are spending lots of extra time at home. Don't feel pressure to "make the most of this time" and get every project on the list completed, there will be some times where we're just taking it day by day, and that's OK. Go outside if you need a quick break, I promise the problems seems smaller out there.

Life Will NOT Be the Same After

It just won't. A crisis this large could really change the way we interact socially and at work, it can change the education and health systems, it can change how we plan for the future—I just don't know. But what I do know is that this is absolutely one of those before and after events that we will measure things against. The good news is that things WILL feel comfortable and close to the normal we're used to again. It might happen slowly without us really noticing that things are back on track, but one day you'll realize we've pulled through on the other side. Maybe it will be the

next time you watch the big game with friends, maybe it’s next time you drop your kids off at school, maybe it’s when you realize you don’t mind being stuck in 5 o’clock traffic, or maybe it’s when you turn the corner in the store and the toilet paper aisle is fully stocked—it’ll stop you in your tracks and I hope you smile. I promise those things will happen again—and I promise I will try my best to never take them for granted. Cancer survivors have moments like this daily, and it’s truly a gift. Don’t let your trauma define you, but don’t forget either.

Guys, this is not going to be easy. I promise there will be moments where you feel like you cannot go another day, and then somehow you will. So far my success rate of getting through tough days is 100% (was that cheesy? idc). We are all in this together, lean on each other. Stay home! Wash your hands.

Hand-Washing Technique With Soap and Water

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