I Couldn’t Have Expected Leukemia to Lead to Both Heavy Self-Criticism and New Friendships

There is something so profoundly altering about being diagnosed with cancer that it results in a new understanding of what is important.

January 16, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

Cancer attacks its victims in countless ways. Although most people who are not personally impacted by this disease would naturally assume that cancer only wreaks havoc on one’s body, that is far from the extent of the damage that it does. Cancer is also an overpoweringly destructive force on one’s emotions and mental well-being. As if that were not enough, cancer never really releases one from its clutches — even if in remission or cured. Once impacted by this loathsome disease, the fear of its recurrence or resurgence is always with you.

And yet there is still more trauma that cancer can create. Because of the sheer unbridled terror that the mere mention of “the C-word” instills in people, people unfortunate enough to be diagnosed with cancer often find themselves somewhat abandoned. Cancer is frequently too much for many friends of those afflicted with it to bear. I know of countless cancer sufferers who have lost friends once their diagnosis became known. This is not, in my view, so much a character flaw in those erstwhile friends as it is an understandable inability to face that which is so terrifying. And because of this terror, many are left at a loss as to what to say or how to help and just divorce themselves from the overwhelming situation altogether. It is regrettable, of course, but not incomprehensible.

Even under the best of circumstances — when there is little impact on existing friendships — cancer is a largely solitary experience. Try though they might, even the best-intended and most giving of friends cannot unfortunately — and fortunately — truly know what it is like to endure cancer unless they themselves have suffered under it. The relentless and pervasiveness of the ramifications of cancer are largely incomprehensible to one with cancer, much less someone trying to understand it a step or more removed.

Yet, in spite of all of this — or perhaps because of it — I have actually found something quite surprising when it comes to the intersection of cancer and friendship: I have made some very dear friends who are unfortunately experiencing many of the same trials and tribulations that I am. I never expected cancer to be a source of anything positive, much less something so vital as

friendship. But to my delight it has been just that.

A not insignificant portion of my amazement about the evolution of these new friendships stems from my long-standing attitude towards having cancer and, more specifically, how it has impacted my own views about myself. If there is anything that I possess in great abundance, it is self-criticism and its frequent cohort, self-loathing. Having cancer does nothing to boost one's views of one's own self-worth. In addition to all of the self-critiques I leveled at myself for years beforehand, the last six years since my diagnosis with leukemia have enabled me to add an entirely new genre of criticism — incurable, chronic illness. If that doesn't make one feel worse about oneself, then that person is a true glass-half-full type if there ever were such a thing.

Not unrelated to this diminution in self-worth, I also experienced a reluctance — bordering on outright apprehension — of associating with other cancer victims. I rather selfishly was concerned that by hobnobbing with others who also possessed an overabundance of defective white blood cells, I ran the risk of meeting those who were worse off than I and thus who were living foreshadows of my future. At the other extreme, but equally self-concerned, I dreaded meeting those with my diagnosis who were much better off than I. I was genuinely apprehensive that such others would make me feel worse about my situation and, to be blunt, even bitter about the hand I had been cruelly dealt.

Despite all of this, however, I somehow managed to forge some wonderful and deeply cherished friendships. It would probably be facile to explain this away as misery loving company, although there is of course both plenty of misery with cancer and plenty of those suffering from it. Rather, while that simplistic explanation might reveal some truth about why we have been brought together, the reality is much more complex and even, perhaps, metaphysical: There is something so profoundly altering about being diagnosed with cancer that it results in a new understanding of that which is important and that which is not. Of course, matters that were always important such as family and living in the moment become only more so with the imposition of a cancer sentence. But beyond that, commonalities and the essence of what makes one a good person take on an outsized role.

In light of that, I have made a number of friends who unfortunately share my predisposition to a malignant existence. Yet, without cancer, we would not have likely met, but more profoundly we might not have given ourselves the opportunity to become friends. By hewing away that which is truly not important, I have found myself able to form such strong bonds with these new friends as we share our experiences not just about cancer, but about what life really means and how much we value it. We come from different places and have many different life experiences that have brought us to this common place, but cancer has lifted the fog that otherwise would have been impenetrable to these friendships. And while cancer may have done irreparable damage to our bodies, the one thing that it has actually improved was our ability to truly see.

Note: This piece was originally published on iHadCancer's website and may be found there at: https://www.ihadcancer.com/leukemia-lead-to-self-criticism-and-new-friendships.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/expected-leukemia-lead-heavy-selfcriticism-new-friendships