# Can’t We All Just Get Along?

We too must be willing to accept the  limitations of those without cancer and still love them for the flawed individuals that they are.

August 16, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

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I do not like to engage in controversy or divisiveness in this space. I want this blog to be a virtual place where those concerned about cancer issues can come and hopefully get some much-needed relief from the endless woes that the disease presents. Nonetheless, these are divisive times in which we live, and I feel as though I can no longer be silent about the toxic rift between groups in our society. Yes, I believe that I must speak out about the diametrically opposed views — and inability to listen — that exists between the two main divisions in our world. I speak, of course, of those with cancer and those without. And given that a summer weekend is upon us — a time when our two worlds will be likely forced to interact over barbecues, watermelon, cornhole contests and other frivolities — I think that it is high time for me to address the elephant in the room.

Those that follow this blog know that this is not my first foray into trying to bring our two worlds together. I have tried in previous blog postings to gently suggest to our non-cancerous friends some of the things that we find most vexing about their interactions with us. I have attempted, for example, to provide a list of useful terms for the uninformed to employ when talking with those of us with cancer. Similarly, I wrote an entire post about things that the unafflicted should most definitely not say to us. Finally, I penned a piece about how, despite their best intentions, we would really prefer it if those without cancer would stop giving those of us with it unsolicited (and generally erroneous) advice. Yet, sadly, all of these efforts have failed to produce the hoped-for results as the gap between our two realities is no more narrow now than before I undertook these Herculean efforts.

In light of the fact that I seem to be getting nowhere with the non-cancer crowd, I have determined that it is incumbent upon us, those who have cancer, to be the bigger people in this debate. I believe that we must, as challenging as it will be, try to put ourselves in their shoes and offer them the compassion that they need and the understanding they deserve.

Let us not forget that it is not their fault that they do not have cancer. Some of us are just more fortunate than others. And there are those that clearly do their darndest to join our elite ranks. You know the ones of whom I speak: The 3-pack-a-day unfiltered Camel smokers who can’t articulate an entire sentence without nearly coughing up what remains of their lungs. The people that are sporting an unnatural level of tan in the middle of January and who want nothing more for Christmas than a ten-session pass to the local tanning salon. The ones who drink from plastic

bottles that are BPA-full. But try as they might, no amount of effort can guarantee one admission into our lofty circle. Even smokers, who seem like they may be on to something, are probably just as likely to develop emphysema or cardiac issues as cancer, and, let's face it, those are second-rate diseases. At best.

Of course, on the opposite end of the spectrum are those that have a clear disdain for us. These people are easily identifiable by certain traits they exhibit and beliefs they espouse. They hold such nonsensical ideas as exercise prevents cancer, your BMI is determinative of your cancer potential, turmeric for every meal is cancer's kryptonite and that people get cancer because they are just lazy or indifferent. Yet even these luddites should be afforded a degree of respect by us: It is not their fault that they are ignoramuses. It is well-documented that most people just aren't that bright. And when people are not too wise, they tend to latch on to pseudo-science and conspiracy theories. But, again, we should offer them compassion: Part of being stupid is being easily frightened. They are afraid of cancer, and that is one thing we can all agree on. The fact that many of this group also believe the moon landing was staged and that vaccines cause autism just should make our hearts ache for them. They are not, sadly, enlightened like those of us with extra white blood cells.

I realize what I am asking of you, my fellow tumor-laden and bad-B-cell–carrying friends, will not be easy. Unquestionably, we will be challenged in our efforts to extend this olive branch to those "others" with whom we must share this world. There will certainly be times when we are dismissed as "good as new" post-chemo or after radiation. We will be pressed to maintain our composure and compassion when we are told "to get over it — don't let cancer ruin your life." And we will be most severely challenged when we are treated with indifference and an assumption that cancer is a one-off experience and not the relentless, permanently life-altering experience we know it to be.

Despite these unavoidable challenges, we must, I urge, reach out to the healthy around us. We need to make them understand that it is okay to be healthy; that not having cancer is not a shortcoming over which they should feel embarrassed or ashamed. We cannot, after all, all be tops at everything. Just as very few of us can be virtuosos, so too can only a limited number of us be worthy of cancer. And although I do believe in the value of hard work (even if I don't personally practice it), there are some limitations that one just cannot will one's way past. Sadly, it is largely up to one's genes whether cancer will be awarded to you (unless, of course, you used to work with asbestos, in which case you might be able to join our ranks despite your genetic make-up).

Most every doctrine of morality preaches compassion and understanding — to turn the other cheek. We too must be willing to do that, to accept the severe limitations of those who do not have cancer and still love them for the flawed individuals that they are. And there is a silver lining to this: At the rate we are going, most people are going to end up with cancer anyway. So we just need to be patient with them; they will get it eventually. One way or the other.

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