Silence Is Golden

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July 17, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

Last week, in this tiny corner of the world wide web (does anyone call it that anymore? And when did they dispense with the need to type “www”?), I wrote a public service announcement in the form of some useful cancer terminology for people to know. Since everyone either has cancer or knows someone who does (a truism I am “borrowing” from the great podcasters at @ThanksCancer!), it seems that people should have some idea what all the buzz is about. Of course, that was just a short blog post and the world of cancer is vast, so I will have to take pen in hand again (another anachronism) to expand upon my list in the coming days.

In the meantime, however, I wanted to issue another PSA (which also deals with the other type of PSA). You see, as important as it is to be able to intelligently converse with someone who is dealing with cancer, it is of near-equal importance to understand the many things that those of us with cancer would really prefer if you did not say. Now, before anyone gets all flustered and starts accusing cancer warriors/survivors/endurers/not-dead-yetters of being hypersensitive, allow me to offer the following: First, as a reminder, we have cancer. Second, just as everyone’s cancer behaves (or misbehaves) differently, so too does everyone afflicted by it have a different level of sensitivity about what can and cannot be said. This admittedly makes it a bit tricky, since one never knows how any particular person may respond to the usage of certain words. That makes for a lot of gray, and if there is one color that people do not like it is gray (except, currently, in their living spaces where it is a fashionable paint choice).

To hopefully cut down on the anxiety that those attempting to speak with someone with cancer might experience in light of this, I have tried to not only list the words and phrases that are a bit sensitive but to put some context around them. A disclaimer: No one is accusing anyone of having anything but the best of intentions, but we all know where the best of intentions can lead (assuming one believes in Hell, which I think is a personal choice).

- “Trooper”: Unless the person suffering from cancer is wearing a beanie and offering to sell you some Samoas or is sporting a sash while trying to earn the Emergency Preparedness badge, I suggest staying away from this one. Facing cancer is not equivalent with being a member of the state highway patrol or somehow enlisting in a private army of one.

- “You’ll Be Fine”: I know of someone who is by all accounts clairvoyant. And although she knew I would say that before I did, she is sadly not an oncologist. Sure, the intentions behind this one, like basically all of these no-no’s are well-meant, it nevertheless feels rather dismissive to someone to have all of their very real fears and anxieties and concerns whisked away by a cavalier three words (one of which is a contraction, for crying out loud) as it suggests that those fears, anxieties and concerns are not justifiable. Well, we would like to think that the utterer of this no-thinker is correct, but to do so we are going to need to see a functioning crystal ball or, at minimum, some proficiency with Tarot cards or a Ouija board. An additional word of caution on this term: The more closely-related that the speaker of it is to the intended audience the less appropriate it becomes. Just because a close family member cannot deal with the reality that her child has cancer does not give her license to say it will all be fine, particularly while in the middle of the third day of one’s second round of chemo infusions while all that infusee is trying to do is nurse some ginger ale and keep down a couple of saltines. (This is just a hypothetical, of course.)

- “Don’t Worry”: I will admit that worrying is not generally a productive use of one’s time, particularly when that over which one is worrying cannot be controlled. Nonetheless, to suggest that someone who has a potentially (if not likely) life-truncating illness should not worry is just a teensy bit Pollyanna-ish. Sure, some people just accept whatever comes their way. Good for them. Many of us, however, are a bit less blasé about having cancer. If we want to worry about it, then dammit we will.

- “Good Cancer”: If ever there were an oxymoron … I am not an oncologist (by training), but thanks to all of my worrying (see above) I am pretty confident that any type of cancer can kill you. And although we do live in a very competitive world these days, I do not think that it is particularly productive to rank cancers based on their potential lethality. Thus, since they all suck, let’s not try to rationalize that any of them are good. They are not. That is why they are used in tandem with the term malignant, which means, if I may paraphrase, “bad.”

- “Be Thankful”: It will come as a great shock to many, but one can hold two differing thoughts in the brain at the same time. Or, at least some of us can. I am thankful every day for my sons, my wife, our dog, my parents, my in-laws (but don’t let them know that) and many other things. But I was thankful for all of that before I learned I had cancer. I don’t need a potential death sentence to be thankful, just like I don’t need someone telling me to be so.

- “Seize the Day”: Okay, okay. No one has actually used this exact phrase with me, but that is largely because I do not hang around people that use such lofty phrases or, similarly, read obscure books by Saul Bellow. But I know sooner or later that someone is going to say that — or something even more obnoxious like carpe diem (Latin is rarely appropriate in polite conversation) — so I just want to go on record now saying don’t do it.

The preceding has been a courtesy notice for those who would otherwise potentially stick a foot in a mouth. It is only a partial list, so check back here regularly for future updates as they are foolishly uttered to me and my many friends with cancer. In the interim, if you are uncertain if what you are tempted to say is kosher or not, just keep it to yourself. You can be silently supportive without offending anyone. Practice your sympathy eyes.

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