Survivor's Guilt

Cancer doesn't discriminate and it's completely and utterly unpredictable. It isolates you and then it takes your friends.

July 10, 2018 By Jen Hodson

I've had a few people ask me to write on this topic, and to be honest, it's a pretty tough one. Because when I think about it, truly think about it, I'm left with a large amount of confusion. It feels selfish, to put myself as the "survivor" in the "survivor's guilt" title, and to break down why this is so fricken tough.

"Survivor guilt (or survivor's guilt; also called survivor syndrome or survivor's syndrome) is a mental condition that occurs when a person believes they have done something wrong by surviving a traumatic event when others did not."

Since I've been diagnosed, I have met so many wonderful humans battling cancer. And sadly, I've lost (edit: this world has lost) several since then as well. If you poll a room, chances are everyone will raise their hand when you ask, "Have you or anyone you love been affected by cancer?" It's everywhere, it's a monster, it seeks to destroy. And destroy, it does.

My mind goes to two women in particular who lost their battles this past year, one of whom who was diagnosed around the same time as me. Why them and not me? Cancer doesn't discriminate and it's completely and utterly unpredictable. It isolates you and then it takes your friends.

Or I think about friends who were diagnosed after me, but whose treatment ended up being more aggressive, taking longer, causing more pain. I had a complete pathologic response, and others needed to revisit their options because they did not. Where once we were chatting daily about life and struggles, we were now strangers on completely different paths. And I don't fault them for finding it difficult to listen to my milestones and accomplishments as they were hit with setbacks and anxiety.

And so, I do feel guilty. I feel guilty to see them sick with worry about their prolonged treatment plans. I feel guilty to be having a glass of wine knowing that bright lights on this earth are no longer here to enjoy it with me. I feel guilty to smile and laugh about embarrassing times during treatment, knowing that so many aren't able to.

And the problem with survivor's guilt, is that you simply can't shake it, because you haven't been on the other side, and you hope every day not to be. So, my best advice for working through this debilitating mental health issue? Give your friends space who may not be able to live as fully as

you are now, and don’t fault them for not being around. Be kind to yourself when you are wondering “why” and instead think about how you can honor their memory with the life you have been given.

I feel the tears well in my eyes as I complete this post, and I’m reminded of something my beautiful friend Kari wrote to me before she passed away:

“Thinking about you too and hoping you’re surrounded by love, light and positivity.”

I know that she continues to wish that now, wherever she is, and she wouldn’t want me to stop in sadness, not even for a moment, for simply still being here.

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