Building a Spiritual Toolbox for Cancer
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Once you are diagnosed with cancer, you are often flooded by a variety of feelings and questions. This flooding happens not just to you—the patient—but to everyone in your life as well. Comprehensive cancer care no longer focuses on just the medical treatment of the cancer and the physical aspects of the disease; rather it attends to caring for the whole person—mind, body and spirit. From a spiritual perspective, a cancer diagnosis is just one more spiritual quest. Spiritual care addresses everything that is not medical. The spiritual quest is often about learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity and through change in our lives. Some of us see a cancer diagnosis as another form of a wake-up call for life. Having cancer peels away our illusions about certainty and control and one of the hallmarks of maturity in life is learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. A physician who had breast cancer eloquently described this process after her own diagnosis, “I see myself not as a survivor but as a patient in waiting, somewhere along the path to a workable truce with an uncertain future. The effort that I have had to extend to accept uncertainty moves me closer to a truly awakened existence. Of this one thing I am certain.”

Uncertainty due to cancer gives rise to an endless series of questions. For example, “Who am I? What am I feeling? What is my purpose here? What do I want out of my life?” Being able to ask questions and to seek information about your deeper self can be an extremely important part of the cancer experience. It can guide you to change in your life, to accept difficult situations, to deepen relationships with others and to a more profound connection to nature. In essence all of these things are about healing, as differentiated from treatment or cure. Treatment is aimed at the body and eradicating or reducing the cancer but healing is that aspect of making whole that which is broken or disconnected.

According to the Australian Aborigines it is important to have connection to four things: the body, other human beings, the Earth and the spirit. These connections provide healing and health. When thinking of the body, one must be witness to how one feels on a given day--assessing for pain, nausea, energy, fatigue etc. Relationships can be great sources of support, but they can also weigh one down. Asking whether relationships are supporting you or whether you are supporting them can be a helpful spiritual question. Sometimes relationships must be let go of if they do not provide for your needs during this time of need. Connections to nature are also important. Every breath can connect you to that life force if one is able to be present and mindful. It is easy to be cut off from the beauty in nature. One’s spirit is one’s witness to the experiences of life and can help one to feel centered and intact. Even when dealing with issues of treatment, there is a connection to spirit. Within one’s spirit lies answers to questions about which treatments to trust or be open to and how that fits with one’s sense of extending time and quality of
Spirit can involve religious traditions, practices and faith, but it is not limited to these. One can be highly spiritual without being religious. Being attuned to one’s spiritual self is being able to dive below the noise of everyday life and find the quiet underneath. In this quiet one’s values in the world can be better understood.

Each of you will address the issues of spirituality on your own, but sometimes it is helpful to think about the categories in which spirituality might be used to facilitate your healing. To do this, one needs a spiritual toolkit. Some important components in this toolkit include the following:

- **Prayer** – whatever that means to you. It can be religious prayers, a hymnal, a mantra, your hopes and dreams that you wish for to a higher power.

- **Religious Services** – formal services can be an important place of healing. There are often others who struggle with their own losses and challenges and can help to focus you on your own spiritual growth.

- **Meditation** – this is a disciplined practice that must be learned. It is an invitation into silence and deep listening to yourself and finding what is true in your own heart.

- **Volunteerism** – being able to give to others is often very healing. It allows you to connect to others and realize that you have something to offer even when you may be struggling. It can take many forms, but must be tailored to your physical energy. Sometimes just listening to someone else who is new to a cancer diagnosis can be a way of providing a compassionate service.

- **Re-programming Old Stories** – sometimes we tell ourselves things about our self or others because it has become a habit. Cancer can present the opportunity to re-evaluate these stories and consider discarding or changing them. It may be an opportunity to shed dead weight.

- **Make Friends with Uncertainty** – this is sometimes a difficult task and not one that each person can hold onto all of the time. Knowing that this is part of spiritual care is important and finding ways to get through uncertainty is useful. Sometimes it helps to find others who, in at a given moment, can be more present with uncertainty and, in being with them, it can have a beneficial impact on you.

- **Ask Deep Questions** – allow time to ask yourself about your life. What is your life about? How do I make it more fulfilling? What do I need?

- **Take Time in Nature** – nature grounds you to the physical world. Sit outside and take 10 breaths and be mindful while doing it. Consider taking a walk along the ocean, touch a leaf, or smell a flower. These experiences help to bring you into the moment and to realize that you are part of a much larger world.

- **Listen to Music** – it is nonverbal and has healing properties. It can heal your soul and help you to be aware of your true feelings.
• Make and/or Look at Art -- find art in nature, find beauty in the world, allow your creative self to speak and to be touched. Looking at and making art can help you transcend your current place and bring inner clarity.

• Slow Down Life’s Process – allow yourself to maximize what is in front of you at this moment in time. This allows you to move away from the anxieties of the future and to be present in a state of greater awareness about your self and all that surrounds you.

• Write a Spiritual Autobiography – describe who you are, what you feel, what is important to you. Write down your spiritual beliefs and what heals you.

Cancer reminds us that our days on earth are finite. It also reminds us that too often we postpone things that are important to us, wait too long to set grievances aside, wait too long to set aside our hurts and selfishness or share our bounty with others. Cancer can be a reminder to nourish our souls, to be creative, to become more informed, more caring and to do good things today.

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