

Cancer Stress Relief Workbook



Steven Pedersen, MPH

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

“All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication, reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system without the prior written consent of the publisher—or in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, license from the Copyright Licensing agency—is an infringement of the copyright law.”

Art Credit: Naomi and Midjourney

Copyright June 2024



DISCLAIMER

Disclaimer: This publication is designed to provide accurate and personal experience information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is provided with the understanding that the author, contributors, publisher are not engaged in rendering counseling or other professional services. If counseling advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought out.

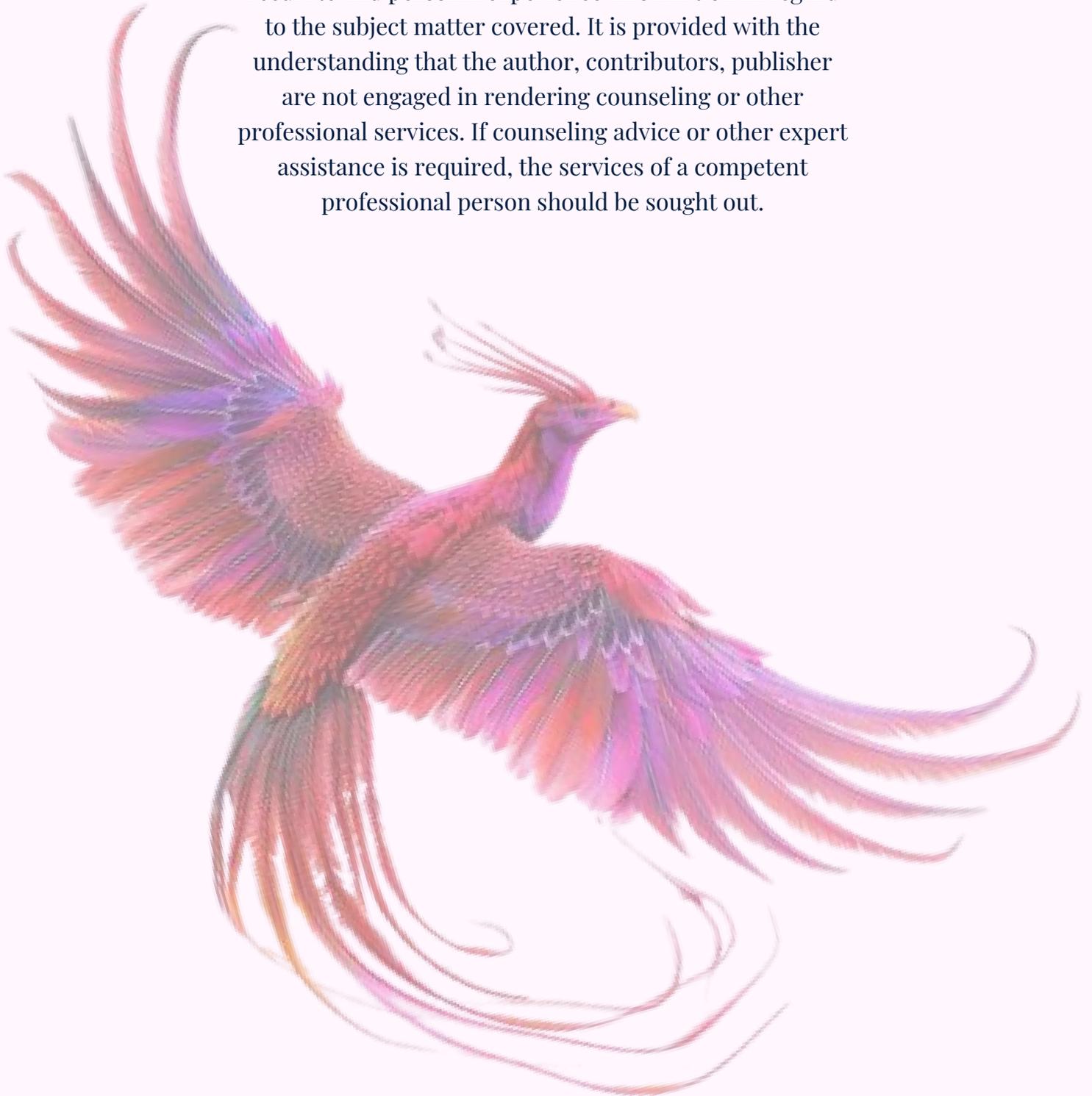


TABLE OF

Contents

01 Anchoring Your Cancer Journey on a Solid Foundation

02 Mastering the Mental and Emotional Ups and Downs of the Cancer Journey



About This Workbook



The hardest part of the Cancer Journey is not the physical, but the mental and emotional ups and downs - the stress, the anxiety, the grief, the fear.

This workbook is designed to accompany the online course Your Cancer Journey. These were created to share tools and ideas to help cancer patients navigate the mental and emotional ups and downs of the cancer journey. The workbook and course are available at www.cancerstressrelief.com.

The artwork depicts the Phoenix, a mythical bird known for cyclically regenerating or being reborn, symbolizing new life emerging from the ashes of its past. This imagery reflects the journey through cancer and the optimism for a fresh start post-treatment.

This workbook is meant to be written in, doodled in, drawn on, and otherwise used!

For each section, there will be an overview of concepts covered in the online course and then one or more exercises to give you an opportunity to dive into and explore the concept. It is not meant to be done in one sitting. In fact, I recommend spending time with each concept - to sit with it, marinate in it, and digest it.

My goal with this workbook and course is to share with you tools and concepts that can help you on your cancer journey with the mental and emotional ups and downs that are the hardest part!

I'm honored to share this journey with you, and wish you peace and happiness along your way!

Steve Pedersen, MPH

Email: stpeders@gmail.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/steve.pedersen.5201>

Tik Tok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@cancercompanion>

About The Author

BC (Before Cancer)

BC (Before Cancer)

I was raised in Canada and come from Icelandic and Danish ancestry. I attended Yale University and graduated with a Master of Public Health (MPH) in 2005. I have spent my career working to strengthen healthcare systems and address determinants of health.

I was married in 1998 to my wife Naomi and we have a family of eleven children (four are adopted). I have had many experiences and opportunities in life including being a dad, a foster dad, a grandpa, owning a candy store, teaching at a university, founding an internet start-up, playing in an orchestra, and founding multiple NGOs. My favorite authors include Gregory Boyle, Hugh Nibley, Brene Brown, Byron Katie, and Adam Grant.



About The Author

MCS (My Cancer Story)

In November 2022, I was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. This was a complete shock! I was 46 years old and living a healthy, active life in Hawaii with my wife and children.

My only symptom was blood in my stool. I knew enough to go to the doctor and was referred for a colonoscopy - my first. Waking up from the procedure, almost the first words I heard were "they found a mass"!

So began my cancer journey. **I went through radiation (25 treatments), chemo pills, all kinds of tests and scans, surgery, installing(?) an ileostomy, side effects (blood clotting, pneumonia, and a pulmonary embolism), and rehospitalization.**

And I'm not done yet!

The hardest part of the cancer journey is not the treatments, it's the mental and emotional ups and downs - the anxiety, stress, fear, and grief!

One thing that helps is walking with others who have been on the same path. I have benefited from so many people who I have had the privilege to meet and learn from!

I wish you well on your cancer journey, and look forward to our walk together!



Anchoring Your Cancer Journey on a Solid Foundation



SECTION 1

The Beginning of Your Cancer Journey

Every story has a beginning, every journey starts with the first step.

The Cancer Journey is different in that the first step was unplanned – it's more like being struck by lightning! One moment everything is familiar and known, the next – all is chaos, unknown and uncertain.

The shock of a cancer diagnosis is very real and is the first emotion that we process on this journey.

Your cancer journey
is a process of
discovery.



Your cancer journey is a process of discovery. You will learn a lot about yourself, your friends and family, the health care system – and most importantly, the inner workings of your heart and mind. You will become much better acquainted with your fears, your insecurities, your stresses, your tears and sadnesses – and also your hopes and joys.

The hardest part of the cancer journey is not the physical – the treatments for cancer and the effects of cancer. The hardest part is the mental and emotional ups and downs that are part of the cancer journey.

The good news is that there are tools and ideas that can help you lessen your fears, explore your stresses, and shrink your anxieties.

I have created this workbook to help guide you through the mental and emotional ups and downs that are part of the cancer journey.

To start, write down
some basic information
about your cancer.

Date of Diagnosis

Presenting Symptoms

Type and Stage of Cancer

Prognosis For Your Cancer





To start, write
down some basic
information about
your cancer.

Treatment options

Your reaction to finding out
you had cancer?

What are your top 3
stresses?

What are your top 3 fears?





To start, write down
some basic
information about
your cancer.

Who is part of your social support network that
will walk with you on your cancer journey?

Who do you know that has cancer or has had
cancer?



Massive Action vs Consistent Action

Change is hard - that's no surprise! If it wasn't hard, we'd be very successful with our New Year's resolutions, and we would have no more bad habits.

A cancer diagnosis can be a powerful motivator for change! However, it can create a sense of panic, that we need change yesterday! We can think of things in our life that may have contributed to cancer, or that may make healing more difficult than it otherwise can be, and we want to change those.

if there's a sense of panic
around the desire to change,
then this stress can actually
be more harmful than helpful.

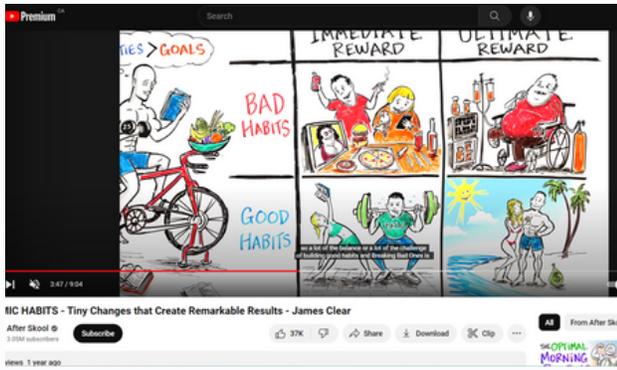


That's not necessarily a bad thing, but if there's a sense of panic around the desire to change, then the stress that comes from the panic can actually be more harmful than helpful.

The good news is that change doesn't need to be driven by panic. In fact, science shows that effective, lasting change doesn't come from a massive overhaul of life, but instead from consistent nudges and actions towards a realistic goal.

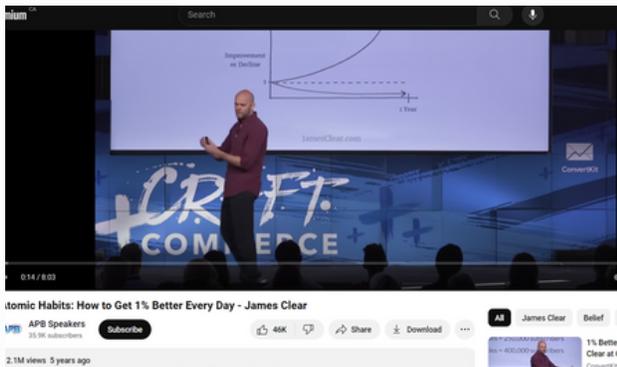
One helpful guide is the book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. He's very much about the approach that change comes from consistency more than massive action.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY OF HIS BOOK, WATCH THESE TWO VIDEOS TO LEARN ABOUT HIS APPROACH.



ATOMIC HABITS – TINY CHANGES THAT CREATE REMARKABLE RESULTS – JAMES CLEAR

[CLICK HERE](#)



ATOMIC HABITS: HOW TO GET 1% BETTER EVERY DAY – JAMES CLEAR

[CLICK HERE](#)

Think of a goal you would like to set for positive, healthy change. Trust your intuition to help you identify what is the most important goal for you to start with. As you think about possible goals, quantify your goal (i.e. to eat one healthy meal per day, eat chocolate only once per week, walk three times a day, etc).

Your goal can be either a stress-reducing goal (minimizing or eliminating a source of stress) or an opportunity-maximizing goal (doing something you have been interested in for a while but haven't done yet).

AN EXAMPLE

When I think about my health, I know I can do better at healthy eating. I want to improve the quality of my diet but don't have the budget to eat all organic. If I made a goal to eat organic vegetables and meat, the goal would be set up for failure as it doesn't align with my budget. I need something different.

My goal is to eat one salad a day. The salad can include vegetables and foods I like (celery, cheese) and avoid ones I don't (tomatoes). I will allow myself to use salad dressing, as to me eating a salad without dressing is too much like eating grass and my success rate would go down. I will make a large salad, with yummy fixings, and dressing!

Even though this isn't perfect, making a habit out of eating a salad will, over time, change my taste preferences towards healthier food. I can also create sub-goals aligned with this goal - for example, choosing a healthier salad dressing. These small nudges/changes will serve to further improve the quality of my diet, piece by piece.

One of the keys to successful change is identifying small changes that you can do that will nudge you towards your goal for change

What is your goal?



What are the small nudges/changes that will increase your alignment with this goal?

Yes, And

‘Yes, And’ is “the secret sauce, the source code, the key that unlocks every door worth opening.” It is a powerful framing tool. It comes from the world of improv. As such, it is applied “where there is no script to guide the direction.”

If you think about the cancer journey, it sounds a lot like improv, in the sense that we don't know the end from the beginning, and there isn't a set of steps we take that will lead to a known outcome. The cancer journey is fluid and flexible. It keeps changing as we are walking along. We can't see too far ahead, we can't see around the corner, and what happens now affects what happens next.

Part of what cancer does is it challenges your beliefs, challenges your future plans, and challenges your identity. “Yes, And” is a tool for navigating these challenges, a way to hold dual truths – to hold space for two things to be true that otherwise might be in competition with each other.

Choosing “Yes, And” is an act of hope,
helping to create a conceptual anchor
for our cancer journey.



The opposite of “Yes, And” is “Yes, But”. “Yes, But” puts things in opposition to each other and we have to choose which is true.

Here’s an example from my own journey.

I believe in God. I believe God is a God of love. And I have cancer. A “Yes, But” frame would be - I believed God was a God of love, but now I have cancer. Maybe God isn’t what I believed. A “Yes, And” frame would be - I believe God is a God of love and I have cancer. God is still what I had believed, even though I now have cancer.

The power of the frame is that our brain looks for evidence to support whichever frame we choose. So “Yes, And” creates a learning space where we can be taught and discover things that support both truths. “Yes, But” also creates a learning space, but one where the truths compete and one wins.

Choosing “Yes, And” is an act of hope, helping to create a conceptual anchor for our cancer journey.

What is something that you believed before you had cancer that cancer has challenged? Write a “Yes, And” and a “Yes, But” statement for this belief. Refer to my previous example for guidance.



Yes, And

Yes, But

Compare both statements, and notice how “Yes, And” creates a space where you can learn and see the power of both being true.

What are your thoughts about the power of “Yes, And”?

Slow Days Not Bad Days

Another key concept for the cancer journey is slow days, not bad days. I believe in the power of words and that how we describe something has a big impact.

In your cancer journey, you'll have days that are hard. Days that you just don't have the same pep to your step. Your energy's not there.

This is normal. It's part of the ups and downs of the cancer journey.

When I first noticed this in myself after my surgery, I thought - oh, I'm having a bad day. That was my thought. Because before cancer, if I was having a day like that, I'd be having a bad day. When I think I'm having a bad day, I think, how do I fix this? And that is the problem!

You don't need to fix slow days, you need to understand them, meet them with compassion. They're there for a reason

With cancer, the point is not to fix the days that we're down or slow, but to let them do what they're supposed to do. If we're having a day where our energy isn't there, we need to slow down. We need to let our body heal and rest and recover or do whatever it is that it's focused on.

And when we change our vocabulary by calling them slow days instead of bad days, we're creating the conceptual freedom that allows us to do that.

Something I found helpful comes from Jim Quick. He said "On the days you only have 40% and you give 40%, you give 100%." You're giving 100% of what's available.

You don't need to fix slow days, you need to understand them, meet them with compassion. They're there for a reason. You're going through something huge, and the slow days signal that your body needs that energy somewhere else. In healing, in recovery, in processing, wherever it's needed, it's needed somewhere else. It's not available for you to use.

And not only is that okay, that's how it should be.



Describe a day you experienced recently that was a slow day. What happened? What were the circumstances?



Describe Your Day

How does changing your perception of this from a bad day to a slow day change your relationship to the day?

Mastering the
Mental and
Emotional Ups
and Downs of the
Cancer Journey



SECTION
02

The Three Businesses

The first idea to help us with stress is the idea of The Three Businesses from Byron Katie.

The idea is this – there are only three businesses in the world: mine, yours, and God's. God's is the things me and you don't control.

Our stress comes when we get outside of our business.

Another way to think about this would be if there were three lanes on a road and we each have a car to drive: mine, yours and God's. If I am reaching out my car window trying to steer your vehicle, what's the likely outcome? Not good. I don't have much control. I don't have your line of sight. I can't see what you see, but I'm still trying to drive your car because either I think I'm better at it or I don't trust you to drive your own or I'm taking responsibility for what happens there when it's not my responsibility.

Our stress comes when we get outside of our business.

We need to be fully present driving our own car, navigating our journey, whatever comes. If we're not fully present in our own car, we're less effective. We have less capacity to navigate our own journey.

When we can identify business that we're in that is not ours, it gives us a conceptual freedom to let go. If it's not ours, it doesn't mean I don't care about it, just that it's not ours. It's not under your control. It's not something I should stress about.

Another way to think about it is if you want to influence somebody, you don't influence them very well by being in their business. You need to be fully present in your own. That's where you'll find ideas and ways to influence them.

Think of times you've been influenced. It hasn't been because somebody jumped into your business unless you invited them there. It's time when people connected with you, when your guard was down because you trusted them. That happens when people are solidly grounded in their own business and then somebody invites them to advise or comment on their business.



Write down some of the relationships or situations that you have found stressful, either now or in the past. As you consider what you have written, identify what parts of the story are your business, other's business, and God's business.

What parts of the story are your business, other's business, and God's business?



What do you notice or learn by looking at your stress through the lens of The Three Businesses?



Shadow Work

If you're like me, anxiety or worry can just carry you away sometimes. Shadow work is a powerful way to re-center and ground yourself.

When we think of shadows, for me the example is always when we want to put on a movie at home on our projector, somebody always reaches their hand in and makes little shadows. It's a fun game, especially for teenagers and younger people, but we know the shadow on the wall is much smaller than the hands or the thing making the shadow.

And so it is with almost all shadows, the shadow is bigger than the thing making the shadow, it's just how shadows work!

the more we do this work, the more we recognize shadows as shadows and not the real thing

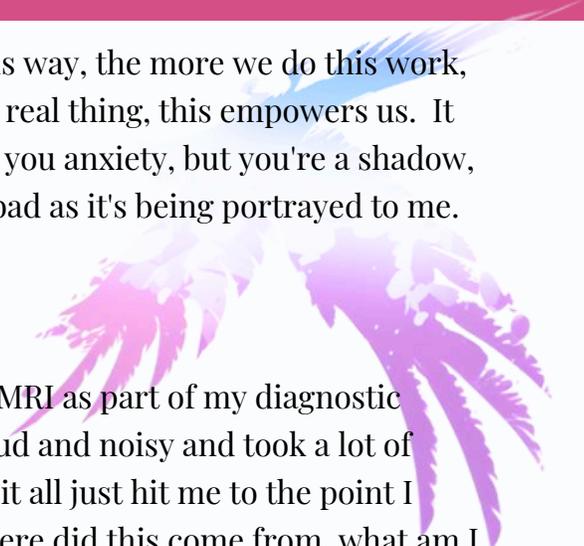
If we think of our anxiety and our fear and our stress this way, the more we do this work, the more we recognize shadows as shadows and not the real thing, this empowers us. It gives us experience from which we draw on to say, I see you anxiety, but you're a shadow, because I've explored you before, and I know it's not as bad as it's being portrayed to me.

That's what a shadow is, it's a portrayal, a projection.

An example from my cancer journey, when I needed an MRI as part of my diagnostic process, I'd never had an MRI before but heard it was loud and noisy and took a lot of time and you're in confined spaces. In the waiting room it all just hit me to the point I was in tears and I sat there with that emotion asking where did this come from, what am I feeling?

So how did I process? Well, for me, I looked around. There's a lot of other people waiting for MRIs. They do this every single day. They know how it works. It'll be fine. I'm on a cancer journey. This hospital's full of cancer patients. People have done this, it'll be okay.

I shifted my focus away from the shadow to the actual thing.



Shadow Work

That's really the goal of what you're trying to do. Don't look at the shadow anymore. Look at the actual thing that was creating the shadow and recognize it for what it is.

I do shadow work every day. It's part of my routine. I don't lift weights, maybe I should, but these are emotional and mental exercises I do every day. Emotional mental weightlifting. And it builds muscles the same way, weightlifting does.

Things in the past, what you used to shy away from or back away from. When they happen now you lean in, and your curiosity kicks in.



As I work through anxiety, explore it, understand it, and see it as a shadow, I'm seeing what triggers it in the first place, and I'm seeing how I respond to that. And the more I understand that, the more I can choose not to follow that pathway.

I can almost watch the shadow pass instead of being hyper-focused on it and zooming in on the shadow and having it be all that I'm conscious of. That's scary. Scary when all you can think about and focus on is a shadow. And the key to this is leaning in.

Shadow Work

I first heard about leaning in from Brene Brown. It's a powerful concept, and it's so important in shadow work. If we think of things that are uncomfortable or difficult or painful, our natural reaction is to move away from them, to step back.

Leaning in is literally what it sounds like: let's get closer, let's see you for what you are. Let's be curious.

Curiosity is so important. The thing about curiosity is when we're curious it takes judgment away because curiosity is just I want to figure this out versus I'm frustrated because this happened and was bad or this person did this and said this and that was bad. Curiosity is more help me understand what's going on and it opens us up.

When they happen now, you lean in, and your curiosity kicks in. And you come to enjoy the process of discovery, of opening up, of becoming.

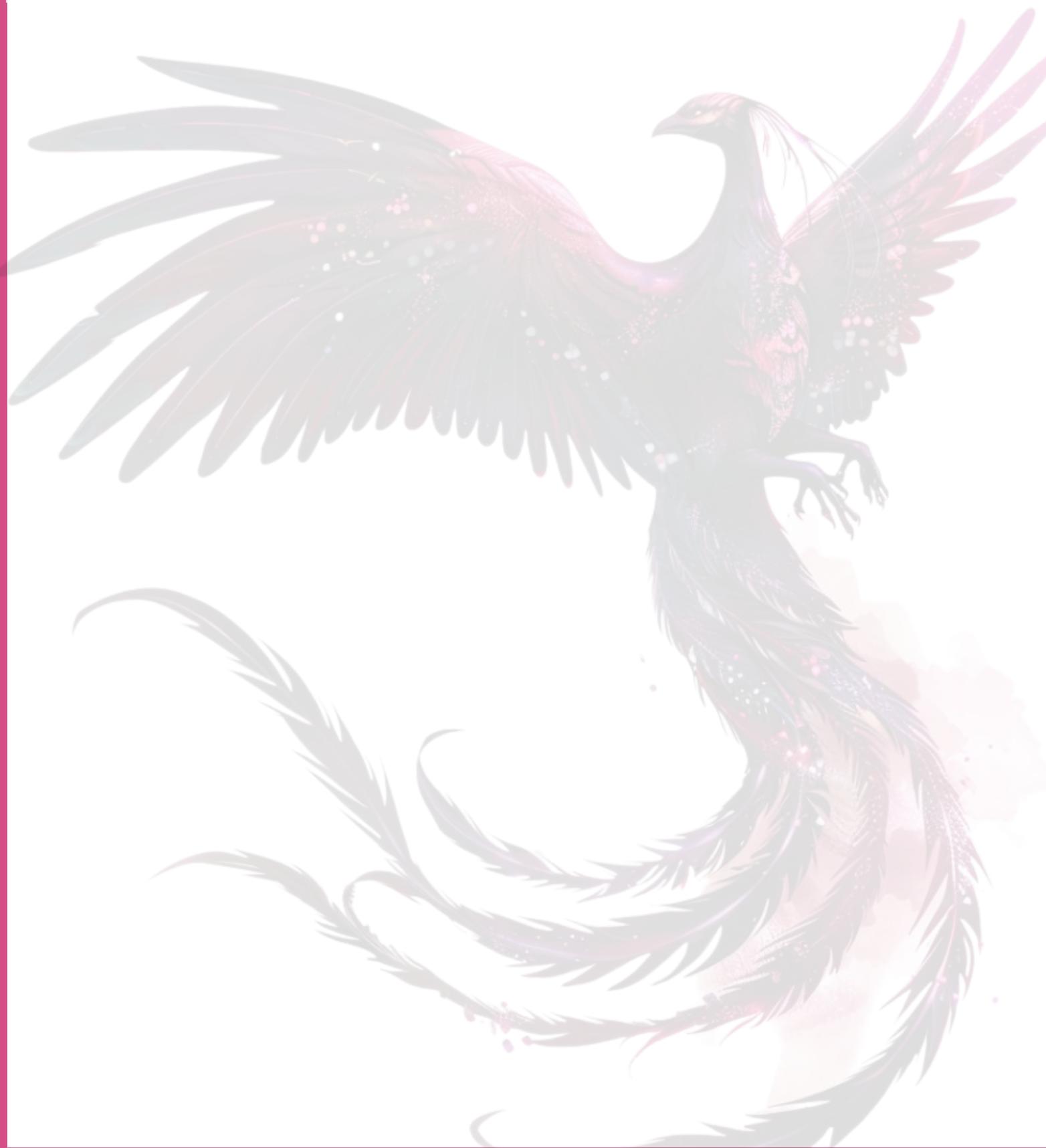


What I've learned is the more I lean in, it becomes a default response.

And there are always lessons to be learned, messages to be heard. It never fails!

You'll notice this, too, as you make it a conscious practice. Things in the past, what you used to shy away from or back away from. When they happen now, you lean in, and your curiosity kicks in. And you come to enjoy the process of discovery, of opening up, of becoming.

Describe a fear or anxiety you have about the future or about your cancer journey.



As you study your description, which parts of it can you check against experience or understanding vs which parts of it are more characterized by what if's and worst-case scenarios?



As you start to distinguish between the actual thing and its projected shadow, what triggers do you notice that bring the shadow to life?



What behaviors do you do when recoiling or withdrawing from this experience?



In contrast, what behaviors do you do when leaning into this experience?



What do you learn about the experience by leaning into it? How does this learning help shift your focus from the shadow to the real thing?





The goal is the more familiar you become with doing shadow work, the better you become at identifying shadows and thus the more power you have and the happier you can be.

SFDs

Stormy First Drafts, or SFDs, is an amazing concept that comes from Brene Brown.

The basic idea is that our brains, by default, create stories to create meaning for our lived experience. And the stories are partial fiction because we never know the whole story, we never have all of the information, so our brain makes it up to fill in the gaps!

And for some reason, these are Brene's words, "they're often one-sided, worst-case scenario stories." And since our brain tends to default to worst-case stories, it helps magnify our fear and anxiety. It makes the shadows bigger than they otherwise were.

When I first learned this, the reason I appreciated it so much is I used to give a lot of weight to my thoughts and controlling my thoughts. My thoughts were my thoughts and part of me, a reflection of me.



my thoughts are actually a story
and a first draft story at that

What Brene Brown helped me understand is that my thoughts are actually a story and a first draft story at that, and it was the draft part that really sunk in.

I want you to think back to school and a first draft you wrote for a paper once. I've written lots of first drafts; I've also marked first drafts and they can get pretty ugly.

Let's say I asked you what you did yesterday that was the highlight of your day and you told me the story and I wrote it down as you said it, there'd probably be spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, punctuation mistakes, rewriting words, skipping words feverishly trying to catch up to what you were saying.

And then if at the end, I gave you a red pen and say, it's your story, go back and highlight everything that needs to be fixed and fix it with a red pen. Can you see how ugly that draft would be? It'd be messy, covered in red ink, it'd be ugly.

SFDs

The problem is, if we don't think of our thoughts as first drafts and just accept our thoughts as our thoughts then we act on them. We believe them. We make decisions based on them. We make judgments based on them. But we shouldn't because they're just first draft thoughts.

And the really, really sneaky part of this is that not only does our brain fill in the gaps, we get a chemical reward, a sense of calm for completing a story.

Here's an example. Let's say my daughter goes out with some friends and they're not a home in time and it's like an hour past when they send me home. My brain starts to wonder what happened, where are they? And I start to create a story about where they could be based on who I know she's with and what their plans were and their usual route home and any similar situations like this. I've created a story that explains why my daughter's late. And even though I know the story isn't true because I made it up, my brain rewards me.

What we have a chance to do is learn to recognize that we're writing a story in our head to explain a situation. And then write a second draft, a third draft, even a fifth or sixth draft if necessary.

Now if it's a bad story, what will happen when she gets home? I'm probably going to be upset, even if the story is false at first, because I'll believe the story that I made up of my head. I'll be waiting by the door. I'll accuse - do you have any idea what time it is? And that emotional reaction is based on the story in my head that explains why she's late. But if I can realize that it's a first draft, then I can rewrite the story and choose a better draft.

You may think our first thoughts are more accurate or truer. Well, they're actually not because the gaps you fill in are from a fear-based perspective, a worst-case scenario perspective.

What we have a chance to do is learn to recognize that we're writing a story in our head to explain a situation. And then write a second draft, a third draft, even a fifth or sixth draft if necessary.



Write a story about something that happened recently that was stressful or difficult.



Consider in your story which parts are facts vs which parts are perspectives, the stories your brain created to fill in your gaps in knowledge. Use a red pen and circle and rewrite any and all parts of your stories that may have been made up. Admire your “ugly” first draft 😊.

Now rewrite the story by changing what was in the gaps to better stories, stories based on truths you know about the people or situation.





It's a powerful, powerful idea that our thoughts aren't reality. They're an understanding of reality. And if we think of them as first drafts, and Brene calls them stormy first drafts because they're often worse-case scenarios and fear-based, then our opportunity is to rewrite them as better drafts, truer drafts, kinder drafts.

And this helps us move away from anxiety, fear, sadness, and negative emotions into a truthful and positive state.

Questioning Our Stories

Building on SFDs, and learning to question my stories has helped me so much. It's literally saved my mental and emotional health many times.

This comes from Byron Katie, and here are a few quotes from her that give the idea some context:

- “A thought is harmless unless we believe it.
- It is not our thoughts, but the attachment to our thoughts, that causes suffering.
- Attaching to a thought means believing that it's true, without inquiring.
- A belief is a thought that we've been attaching to, often for years.”

This gives us another perspective on the concept that our thoughts are just our stories, and that we don't have to accept them just because they are our thoughts. We can choose whether or not to attach to them, whether or not to believe them.

learning to question my stories
has helped me so much. It's
literally saved my mental and
emotional health many times



Have you ever watched a scary or tense movie, and then you find yourself a little more edgy, a little more reactive to things? If you examine your thoughts, it is likely that they are racing further afield than normal.

Learning to question them and understanding where they come from helps free you from them. You can learn to look at those thoughts realizing normally I don't think this way, this is the result of watching that movie! And with that understanding comes a capacity to let the thoughts pass without attaching to them or believing them.

Byron Katie has four questions that help us question our thoughts:

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely 100% know that it is true?
3. How does it make you feel when you believe it?
4. Who would you be without this story/belief?

Questioning Our Stories

First question, is it true? That's an immediate check. You know, if I've got a story in my mind, and it's causing me stress, I can feel it. Now that I know it's just a story, it's just a first draft, is it true? And there's only two possible answers, yes or no.

The second question, can you absolutely 100% know that it's true? Again, only yes or no answers. But it's very difficult to answer this question yes. Even if you answered the first question yes. Because it's very rare, almost impossible, to know all information relevant to a story. Somewhere in a story, we're making it up to fill in a gap. We're adding to gaps based on our knowledge and our understanding based on our past experience. And when we know that we're filling in gaps is how our brain works, we can accept that it's not always done accurately. So it's very difficult to answer the second question, yes.

So even with just these two questions you can see how we're starting to question the story, we're starting to lessen its hold on us.

it's very rare, almost impossible, to know all information relevant to a story. Somewhere in a story, we're making it up to fill in a gap



The third question - how does it make you feel when you believe it? Often there's a negative emotion attached. I'm upset. I'm worried. I'm stressed. I'm freaking out.

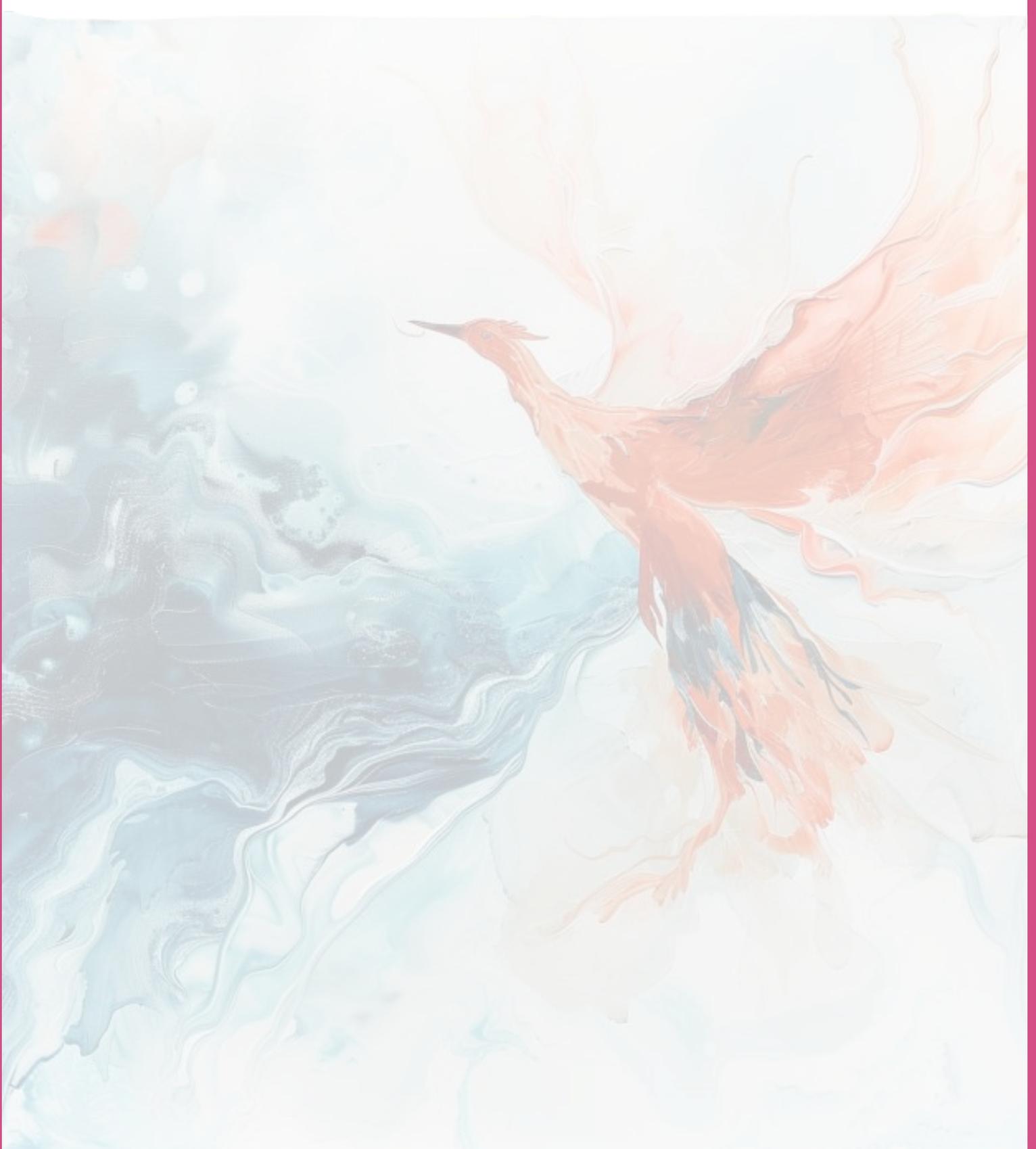
And the last question - who would you be without this story? I'd be the person I was before I knew it - before I thought it happened.

Think of the stories you've heard in your life that have had a big impact on you. Think of gossip you may have heard. Think of experiences you've had. Now imagine if you've been able to apply these four questions at that time.

They're game-changing questions!

Let's try this exercise.

Write down a story that causes you stress or anxiety or fear. Be honest, don't polish it. Write it in its rawest form.



Now question it with the four questions and write your answer to each of the questions.



Now consider your original story and your answers to the four questions. Usually you can find a way to seeing that you are better off without the story, that it isn't as true as it first appeared, that you are free to write a better draft.



Bonus Section – Happiness Now

Cancer is a cloud that challenges and threatens us. It casts a shadow over our identity, our future – so many things! When we are in the middle of cancer, our emotional and mental ups and downs are BIG and real. We may think that one day we can be happy again – after cancer.

The trick is to learn the skills of Happiness Now!

This is not toxic positivity – pretending to be happy in the face of cancer but knowing that the mask of a smile is fake.

No, this is much harder – it is learning to be happy even with cancer! This is key to navigating the ups and downs of the cancer journey and creating the possibility of happiness for your journey. We may think that happiness comes after cancer. This is a trap!

We may think that happiness comes after cancer. This is a trap!



Noted happiness researcher Shawn Achor describes it this way:

“Most...follow a formula for success, which is this: If I work harder, I'll be more successful. And if I'm more successful, then I'll be happier...And the problem is it's scientifically broken and backwards.

Every time your brain has a success, you just change the goalpost of what success looked like... And if happiness is on the opposite side of success, your brain never gets there. We've pushed happiness over the cognitive horizon, as a society. And that's because we think we have to be successful, then we'll be happier.”

Or in our situation – we believe that when we're healthier, we'll be happier. We push happiness over the cognitive horizon of our cancer experience. It is a state reserved for the future. But happiness doesn't work that way!

Happiness Now

“Our brains work in the opposite order. If you can raise somebody's level of positivity in the present, then their brain experiences what we now call a happiness advantage, which is your brain at positive performs significantly better than at negative, neutral or stressed. Your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, your energy levels rise. Which means we can reverse the formula. If we can find a way of becoming positive in the present, then our brains work even more successfully as we're able to work harder, faster, and more intelligently.”

This sounds compelling to me! I need higher energy levels. In going through cancer, there are many difficult decisions to make. Having higher intelligence and creativity would lead to better decision-making.

So how do we do it? How do we, even on our cancer journey, find ways of becoming positive in the present?

Our brains work in the opposite order. If you can raise somebody's level of positivity in the present, then their brain experiences what we now call a happiness advantage



Shawn Achor continues:

“There are ways that you can train your brain to be able to become more positive. In just a two- minute span of time done for 21 days in a row, we can actually rewire your brain, allowing your brain to actually work more optimistically and more successfully. We've done these things in research now...getting them to write down three new things that they're grateful for for 21 days in a row, three new things each day. And at the end of that, their brain starts to retain a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative, but for the positive first.”

Have you ever bought a car, and then noticed how many people drive that car? It's happened to me many times. Even when we bought a 22 passenger bus, I was sure no one else drove such a thing. But sure enough – there were other buses on the road! What is happening here is that our brain is changing what it is noticing. Acquiring a vehicle sends a message to the brain to notice other like vehicles, whereas before that information was just “noise”.

This is similar – our brain can be trained to notice things!

Happiness Now

Scientists say that the human brain can process 11 million bits of information every second. But our conscious minds can handle only 40 to 50 bits of information a second. That's about 0.0003%!

We train our brain in what to notice – whether intentionally or unintentionally, we give it instructions about what to notice, what to pay attention to.

Gratitude is a powerful way to train our brains to scan for positive things, which over time creates for us a more positive default mental and emotional space.

Another effective practice is to journal. Journaling about one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours allows your brain to relive it.

My favorite is random acts of kindness! This can be as simple as smiling at someone or holding a door open. Or it can be as profound as sending someone donuts that live far away (thank you Uber Eats!). Random acts of kindness are conscious acts of kindness.

By doing all of these activities, by making them part of our daily routine, we train our brain just like we train our bodies. And we learn that we can be happier now, even in our cancer journey!

By doing all of these activities, by making them part of our daily routine, we train our brain just like we train our bodies. And we learn that we can be happier now, even in our cancer journey!



What are three things that you're grateful for today?



Write a positive experience you've had in the past 24 hours

What is a Random Act of Kindness you would like to do for someone else?



A Few Last Words

Cancer is terrifyingly real – the only thing I am aware of that is more powerful is love.

My hope for you, my gift to you, is that you'll be able to increase your capacity, your space, your experience with love. Being able to love what is - no matter what it is - on your cancer journey.

Wherever it takes you, in the ups and downs of your cancer journey, it's been my privilege to walk beside you.

I look forward to a continued walk, a continued association, and continued opportunities to learn from you and to share with you.

If we haven't already, connect with me on social media – and may there be the best road possible for your continued cancer journey.

Cancer is terrifyingly real –
the only thing I am aware of
that is more powerful is love.



Steve Pedersen, MPH

Email: stpeders@gmail.com

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/steve.pedersen.5201>

Tik Tok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@cancercompanion>