

The Ten Commandments of Coping with Cancer for Survivors and Caregivers

by William Penzer, PhD

I. Find a Medical Team in Whom You Have Confidence and with Whom You Feel Comfortable

Putting together your medical team is perhaps the most important decision you will make regarding your cancer treatment. It is paramount to find a team of experienced healthcare professionals that you trust. All kinds of obstacles may stand in your way – like insurance restrictions or a lack of treatment centers in your area – but don't give up until you find a medical team in whom you have confidence and with whom you feel comfortable.

II. Stay Informed

While you do not need to be as knowledgeable as your oncologist is, you do need to be an informed patient or caregiver. The more informed you are about your disease and its treatment, the better you will be at making educated choices about your care.

III. Fight with All Thy Might

Some people are opposed to the battle-based metaphors often associated with the cancer experience. However, I tend to view cancer as a David and Goliath battle royale. I believe you should fight cancer with everything you have. As for caregivers, your role is to help your loved one fight by encouraging them and by not being a source of irritation or negativity.

IV. Embrace Optimism

Research shows that, in all life's endeavors, the more optimistic we are, the better we feel and the better we do. Going a step further, even if having a positive outlook doesn't alter the outcome, it does make the journey a little easier to bear.

V. Try to be Patient and Kind with your Support Team

You will find that your moods can fluctuate a great deal during cancer treatment. Pain, fatigue, fear, and difficult emotions can all affect your current mood. And while everyone on your support team means well, they can sometimes say or do the wrong thing when you are in no mood to abide it. However, it's important to try to find the right words to express your feelings, rather than snapping at those who are there to help you. If you find yourself having a less-than-kind moment, take some time to rest or do an activity you enjoy, maybe watching a movie, to reset your mood.

VI. Avoid Toxic People

Though you should try to be patient with people who make occasional gaffes, you may need to distance or detach yourself from those who are chronically upsetting to you despite your kind and gentle feedback. You will encounter many people who, though they may truly care about you, manage to put both feet in their mouth every time they open it. You may need to limit time spent with these toxic people while you are undergoing cancer treatment.

VII. Find Tools That Help You Heal

To counter cancer, strong treatments are needed. These treatments can leave you physically, mentally, and emotionally depleted. Find tools to help you heal and move forward. For example, research shows that meditation, mindfulness, massage, yoga, and exercise can help you rebuild your strength while also recharging your emotional batteries. Keep in mind that caregivers also have their own mind-body-soul healing to do, as the trauma of cancer takes its toll on everyone.

VIII. Find Helpful and Engaging Distractions

Cancer can become one long hyper-focused, mindboggling, draining obsession. Find something that enables your mind to take a break from the intensity of cancer. Almost anything is worth pursuing if it provides a healthy distraction.

IX. Seek Support among Fellow Survivors

The community of cancer survivors can be a very special source of support. Cancer survivors share an incredible bond like none other. Reach out to fellow survivors to form a network of support through the journey.

X. Be Receptive to Miracles

It took quite a while for my scientific mind to embrace the idea of miracles. However, what I have come to call "unrealistic optimism" is oftentimes worth embracing. There are many stories of "against all odds" survivorship. I sincerely hope you can open yourself up to this type of optimism as you journey through Cancerville.



Dr. William Penzer is a psychologist in private practice in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, and a frequent speaker at cancer-related conferences. He has written three books and numerous articles to help people cope better with cancer. To learn more, visit cancerville.com.