

Steps toward Rebuilding a Positive Sense of Self after Cancer

by William Penzer, PhD



In an ideal world, after your last cancer treatment your doctor would offer an infusion of self-esteem, a magic potion to plug the holes in your self-image left behind from your journey through Cancerville and replenish your reserves of self-confidence. Unfortunately, it isn't that easy. If cancer has left your self-esteem in shambles, the task of reclaiming a healthy sense of self will be a unique challenge – but it's definitely a doable one.

Your *self-image* boils down to the way you see yourself as a person, taking into account your appearance, intelligence, accomplishments, finances, relationships, and emotional and physical health. The way you feel about yourself in relation to these characteristics contributes to your sense of worth, or your *self-esteem*. Together, self-image and self-esteem form the basis of your *self-confidence*, the trust you have in yourself regarding your qualities and abilities.

Many filters can distort the way you view yourself and cause you to feel inadequate and down on yourself. Cancer is just one of them. The following steps

can help you re-establish a positive self-image and make way for renewed self-esteem and confidence in the face of cancer.

Recognize that everything is relative.

Each crisis is relative to every other crisis. As bad as things can seem, they could always be worse. By accepting this concept, you'll be less likely to fall into a cycle of self-pity that works against your efforts to renew a positive sense of self. Yes, you have cancer. But you're still alive, and you most likely have options available for treating your cancer.

Accept that bad things happen.

Cancer doesn't discriminate. You can't change the fact that it happened to you, so rather than dwelling on the inequity of it all, try to focus on the future and search for ways to reinvent yourself.

Adapt to change.

Human beings are amazingly adaptive. We have been adapting to change and finding new solutions to challenges since the dawn of time. Instead of assuming that you will never adjust to the changes brought on by cancer, believe that you will grow from your experience. With this attitude, you can begin to rebuild your life in a meaningful way.

Re-evaluate your goals. Think about your goals, dreams, and aspirations. Have they changed since your cancer diagnosis? Have you dropped the proverbial

Ferrari fantasy and now simply seek health, peace of mind, and financial stability? Prioritize the things you want in life and go after them.

Learn from your journey. There are many lessons you can learn from your experience with illness that will bolster your sense of self. For example, many cancer survivors say they've learned to stop sweating the small stuff. You may also learn the importance of taking better care of yourself, focusing on the present, and cultivating meaningful relationships.

Redefine yourself. Allow yourself to adopt a broader definition of self, one that acknowledges that you are more than your illness. It should include the qualities that make you unique, special, and loveable, as well as your accomplishments and your goals.

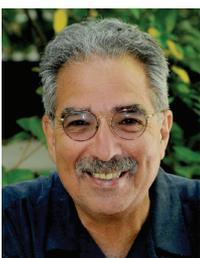
Turn your energies toward inner healing. Just as our bodies often need help to heal, our minds also require some healing assistance. You might consider seeing a counselor or therapist, meeting with a life coach, joining a



support group, reading inspiring books and articles, journaling, meditating, repeating daily affirmations, or all of the above. Healing takes time, so be patient with yourself as you find the approaches that work best for you.

Keep moving forward. Try to see the challenge of reclaiming your self-image and self-esteem as a necessary, doable, and transformative part of your overall recovery from cancer. This is your chance to become the most self-confident and self-loving person you have ever been. After all, being a survivor of anything suggests a pride-worthy strength of will and determination.

Dr. William Penzer has been a practicing psychologist in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, for more than 40 years and has written three books for cancer survivors and caregivers. For details, visit cancerville.com.



Dr. William Penzer