

# Leveraging Positivity in Cancer Care-

*Is our own voice friend or foe?*

By Katelyn Carey, BSN, RN

Many of us have heard that if we want to give an edge to our overall health and recovery chances, we should stay positive. There is a reason for that, but there's also a reason as to why that's completely ridiculous. For starters, cancer is about the least positive thing most people could picture having happen to them.

Where does positivity help us, how do we maintain it in stressful situations, and when is all just too much and it's ok if we go curl up on the couch and cry for an hour with a cup of hot chocolate and a comfort object?

*Positivity helps us the most when it helps us endure and engage in the present to reach a better future.* Positivity helps us to stay engaged in our care practices and helps us muscle through the less pleasant aspects of getting through stress and disease. It also helps our bodies to reduce the stress and inflammation hormones that can contribute to illness.

But our minds are still going to become overwhelmed and need

to withdraw on occasion. *Dealing with stressors like cancer is tough stuff, nobody hits it 100%.* Positivity becomes toxic when we feel guilty for those moments when we aren't 100%, for those moments when maybe we're about 10% in our ability to function.

There are things that strengthen our ability to cope and that help to pull us back out of those dark, less functional spots when we do land there. Two of those things I have discussed here previously: making use of functional communication tools to manage your healthcare, and making use of friends and support people. Both can help you stay positive and endure stressful times. There is another tool that I want to talk about.

Let's start here: the most important relationship you have is *you to you*. It doesn't seem like that should necessarily qualify as a relationship, and yet...whose voice is most likely to be critical or disparaging of us? Our own. *Studies say we are absolutely our own worst critics.* Think about



anything you have stress around right now. Maybe it's a cancer diagnosis. Maybe it's something else. Give yourself permission to hear and take note of 2-3 comments from your inside voice about how you are handling things. Would you feel comfortable saying those same comments to a friend?

As an example- we would never allow a friend to blame themselves for something as random and uncontrollable as getting cancer. But we may jump to blame ourselves. Did we drink too much, exercise too little, or somehow act in a way that created this need for us to be punished by the events that are now unfolding? *We are looking for a sense of control in*

*these moments*, but we are sometimes thrashing ourselves in the process.

Human beings are innately programmed to focus on the negative. And nowhere is this more detrimental to our own wellbeing than when we repeatedly give our energy and attention to negative thoughts about ourselves. This habit can undermine our ability to manage stress and stay engaged in self-care practices.

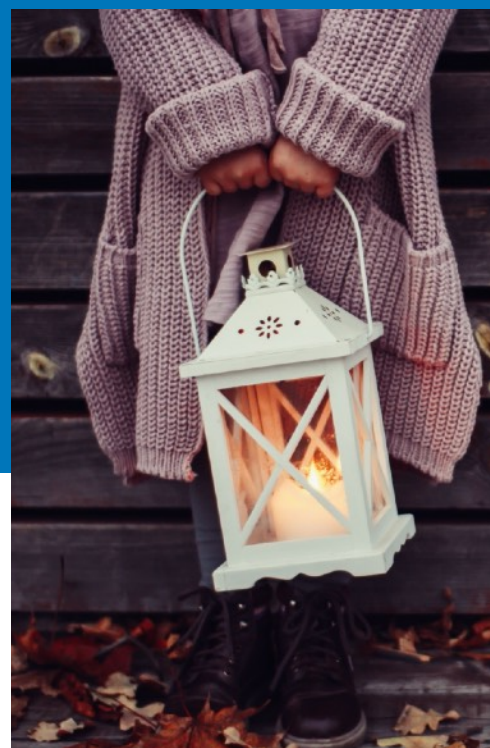
So what do you do when you're feeling like you can't love/support yourself fully, either because of anger and judgement, or because of numbness? This is a tough one. But there are interventions that work.

One of the easiest ways to keep tabs on your internal voice is to *ask yourself if you're speaking in words/thoughts that you would use for a friend...* be your own friend. Make sure the way you're thinking of yourself, even when being critical, is still kind. Another way to monitor things is to ask yourself how your words would translate if you spoke them to a child. I believe that all of us still have the child version of ourselves inside of us. Would you ever tell a child that their body was disgusting, or that it's their fault they are sick? I hope not. And I hope you never say those things to yourself either.

*Speak to yourself as you would to a friend...or think of it as honoring your inner child.*

At the toughest part of my life I took the above method a step further. I imagined a room in my head, and I put my child self into that room. When I was feeling particularly negative or confused, I would enter that room in my imagination and speak softly to my inner self. I would offer her comfort, or just check in on what she was doing or what she said she needed. Many good self-care rituals were born from this exercise.

It breaks my heart to hear women say that they can't look at their scars, or can't stand the idea of touching their bodies after surgery. If this is you, there is still a child self inside you feeling your rejection. What can you say to that child? What can you do to find your pride and positivity again? If you're not certain, then I encourage you to reach out for help through a trusted friend or a counselor. *You deserve every edge that a positive inside thought process can give you during recovery.*



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Writer Katelyn Carey is a nurse educator and author who specializes in trauma-based communication and education. Using cognitive science and 20 years experience in ER, Hospice, and acute care, Katelyn teaches communication strategies and recovery tools that are research based and trauma informed.

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