

Journaling the Cancer Journey

by Kay Marie Porterfield, M.A.

Since you first found out you had cancer, many thoughts may have spun through your mind. Right now you might be feeling:

- Angry that your body has betrayed you,
- Afraid of your illness and of what may happen next,
- Sad over the loss of your physical health,
- Out of control and helpless, as if you are at the mercy of cancer,
- Alone because others don't fully understand what you're going through,
- Confused as you decide what to do next.

How Journal Writing Can Help You to Cope:

Writing in a journal is an effective way to handle these and other emotions that living with cancer has triggered. Often people facing a serious illness find it difficult to express their feelings to others. Some aren't used to revealing their emotions. Others feel a need to be strong for the sake of the people around them. For whatever reason we do it, when we keep our emotions bottled up, we increase our stress and the impact it has on our bodies. Journal writing empowers us to express our difficult feelings in a safe and private way. It allows you to come to terms with cancer at your own pace and in your own way. Your journal is always there to receive your thoughts and feelings.

In addition to giving you a chance to express yourself and reduce stress, regular journal writing provides a way to make sense of life events, find meaning in them and learn the lessons they have to teach. Because journal writing helps us to focus inward, it fosters coming to terms with illness and regaining a sense of control. Journal writing also helps people to clarify their thoughts and make good choices.

As you work through the initial shock of your diagnosis and the uncomfortable feelings that and treatment can provoke, writing can aid you to get in touch with your basic values, to rediscover the positive qualities and strengths you had forgotten as well as to uncover new ones. Journal writing enables you to put illness in perspective. By writing, you will realize that your illness is only a part of you, not the whole person.

The Physical Benefits of Journal Writing:

Studies conducted at Southern Methodist University, Ohio State University, University of Texas at Austin, and North Dakota State University show that the practice of writing provides both a sense of well-being and health benefits that include:

- Pain reduction.
- Immune function improvement, including raised T cell counts.
- Resistance to minor illnesses such as colds and flu.
- Relief of physical stress shown by lowered blood pressure and heart rate.
- Generally improved physical health.

Getting Started:

Chances are you already have what you need in order to keep a journal – something to write with and something to write on. Use your favorite writing instrument whether it is a ballpoint, a pencil, a felt tip pen or colored markers. If keyboarding is easier for you, consider keeping your journal on your computer.

Although most bookstores sell elegant journals with leather covers and gold-edged pages, these can make journal writing seem like an impossible task. Many people are reluctant to honestly write the hurt, anger, sadness and confusion they feel on fancy pages. Some people find blank books like these to be inhibiting in other ways. Rather than writing about their everyday lives, they wait for profound thoughts. Their journals remain unopened and unused. Afraid to make a mistake, others write very little or nothing at all.

Inexpensive spiral notebooks, composition books, legal pads and sketchbooks allow you the freedom to be yourself and to express your thoughts and feelings honestly. They liberate you from worrying about having to come up with profound insights and from fears about your penmanship, spelling, and grammar.

If you are afraid that someone will read the words you are writing without your consent, you may censor what you put on the page. This will decrease the benefits writing brings. Be clear with others about your right to privacy. Decide where you will keep your journal when you are not writing so that others will not be tempted read it without your permission.

You may share passages from your journal with family, friends and members of your cancer support group if you wish. Some people decide to revise and copy parts of their journal entries into an elegant blank book to give to another person. What you share and what you keep to yourself is up to you. Some journal keepers save their writings in order to reread them or pass them on. Others throw them away. The choice of whether to keep or to discard your journals is also yours alone to make.

What to Write About:

Because your journal is a unique reflection of who you are, there is no right way to keep it. The type of writing that has been shown to provide emotional and health benefits is writing about what happens to you and setting down how you feel about it.

During some phases of your illness and treatment you may not have the energy to set down more than a word or two each day in order to track your feelings and what you did. That's fine. Every little bit helps. (Some journal therapists call these brief notes telegraph entries.) You might consider tape recording your thoughts and feelings at these times.

As you become comfortable with keeping a journal, you may want to use other techniques in addition to keeping a daily log of events and feelings. A few possibilities are listed below. Experiment to find out what works best for you.

Lists

Write down 50 ways in which your life changed since your diagnosis, 50 strengths you possess, 50 qualities within yourself you wish you could change, 50 ways you can nurture yourself. While you're at it, make a list of 50 lists you could write in your journal.

Unsent Letters

During major life transitions we often feel a need to resolve old conflicts or to tell people from the past the things we wish we'd said to them long ago. Often these people are unavailable to us. We may need to express ourselves to the people who are currently important to us, but hold ourselves back. Writing unsent letters to these people in your journal is a powerful way to finish old business, let go of old resentments and move forward.

Prayers

If you are a spiritual person, you may want to try writing letters to God or your Higher Power in your journal. Many people find written prayer gives them comfort and solace in difficult times.

Memories

Write about an earlier time in your life when you faced a challenge with courage, your experiences with illness as a child or your reactions when you learned family members or friends had cancer. Write about your childhood – your favorite toy, the most eccentric relative you can remember, your best friend from first grade, your first crush.

Dreams

Before you go to sleep at night set the intention to remember your dreams. First thing when you wake up in the morning write them down. Even though they might not make sense at the time, when you record your dreams and reread them over time, you will be surprised at the insights and guidance they contain.

Reflections

Collect sayings and quotations that move you. When you want to journal, but can't think of a single thing to write, choose one of them and write about it.

Word Sketches

Become a word artist. Carry your journal with you to create word pictures of what you observe. Jot down scraps of conversation. Describe the sights and sounds, the tastes, the smells, the way things feel.

Counting Your Blessings

Just because you have cancer and are keeping a journal, doesn't mean you are limited to writing about your illness. Be sure to keep an account of the good things in your life as

well as the hassles. Writing down your daily blessings – a glorious sunrise, a smile from a stranger, a letter from a friend – can boost your mood.

According to a recent study conducted at the University of California Davis, people who kept gratitude journals exercised more regularly, were more optimistic, felt better about themselves, were less troubled by physical symptoms and had more energy than those who wrote about neutral or negative events.

Getting Extra Help:

Living with cancer is an intense experience. If as you write, you feel overwhelmed by your feelings or stuck in a downward spiral, try changing the subject to one that evokes good feelings for you or take a break and set your journal aside. You can always pick it up later. Should the out-of-control feelings persist, schedule an appointment with a helping professional to explore other methods of coping.

Books about Journaling for People With Cancer:

Writing Your Way Through Cancer by Chia Martin (Hohm Press, 2000, 125 pages) applies several journaling techniques -- letters, affirmations, poetry, dialoging and dream work -- to the emotional and physical aspects of the cancer journey. Beautifully written, it provides the basics and the inspiration you need to begin journaling. Offering both consolation and encouragement, *Writing Your Way Through Cancer* helps readers to view cancer as a catalyst for spiritual transformation.

I have CANcer Workbook and Journal by Terri Hoyland (InnerSources, Inc., 2001, 140 pages) provides structure for your journaling. The author covers the spiritual aspects of the cancer journey as well as the emotional and physical. Space is provided for writing down health information and research. The book also contains stories of how people with cancer have coped with their illness.

The Healing Way, A Journal for Cancer Survivors by Margie Davis (Clement Books, 2000, 160 pages) contains 60 exercises. Much of the book focuses on the treatment process, including chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. Other topics include What Matters, Benefits of Illness, Loose Ends and Thoughts of Mortality. Margie Davis, the author, teaches six-week online journaling workshops for people with cancer. The workshop cost is \$30. For more information, visit her website www.writingtoheal.com.

About the Author:

Kay Marie Porterfield, M.A. facilitates journal writing workshops for people in the midst of life transitions including illness and bereavement. She also trains social workers and counselors about how to effectively use writing in their work with clients. Her website www.kporterfield.com is filled with suggestions for journaling, life story writing and other aspects of creativity as a healing process.

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