


# Chapter 3

## When Lighting Strikes Twice: Purposefully Seeking Growth in Cancer's Journey

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Cancer is a significant life event that can also be considered traumatic across multiple events within a treatment episode. As a result, patients may experience typical and paradoxical reactions across all five life domains: physical, mental, cognitive, social, and spiritual. Cancer can generate experiences of loss, inducing a season of grieving. Additionally, a journey with cancer may involve negative cognitive spirals, which have the potential to be detrimental to overall outcomes. Fortunately, cancer can also produce posttraumatic growth (PTG), which is correlated to positive outcomes across all five life domains and future adversities. With intentional use of PTG principles and engagement in strategic activities, including support groups, cancer patients can increase positive physical, emotional, and spiritual health during a treatment episode and in survivorship.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cancer is easily one of the scariest words in the English language and can create a crisis reaction for those who hear this diagnosis for themselves or a loved one. *Cancer* is defined as the progressive, dysfunctional growth and division of cells that interfere with a function of tissue and systems of an organism. Cancer is also a common experience, as the American Cancer Society (2024) reports that 1 in 3 people will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives. Additionally, *early-onset cancer*, which is cancer diagnosed in people under the age of 50, is increasing (UC Davis Health, 2024). There is good news too. Medical advances are detecting cancer earlier, which is significantly correlated to positive outcomes. Moreover, cancer research and pioneering treatment protocols are helping people with cancer live longer with managed disease processes and/or achieve long-term remission and lifetime cures (National Cancer Institute, 2024). While these medical advances are exciting and provide hope to those struggling with cancer, the emotional, mental, and spiritual wake of a diagnosis can be a daunting journey; frequently eroding a sense of safety that can plague a survivor long after the physical danger of

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-5400-1.ch003

cancer has been eradicated. Cancer can produce a barrage of emotions, positive and negative. How one strategically approaches cancer can dramatically affect the outcome holistically. Similar to the treatment plan a medical team creates to attack cancer, an intentional game plan is central to one's mental health during treatment and in survivorship.

This chapter is a blend of empirical research concerning how to effectively approach the crisis of cancer and anecdotal application of lived experiences. The chapter will begin with a discussion of cancer as a significant life event that can create considerable stress and trauma. Cancer may also create situations of grief due to an unfavorable prognosis and impending death and/or the loss of one's function, body parts, sense of safety, and/or future plans. However, due to the crisis of cancer, patients commonly find they must put off their grieving until the immediacy of diagnosis and treatment has passed, creating paradoxical reactions that loved ones may not understand once the patient is in remission. The chapter will discuss the complexity of the cancer response, the crisis and cognitive processes that put these dynamics into motion, and ways to approach cognitive spirals to increase positive outcomes. The grief theories proposed by Kübler-Ross and Westberg will be discussed, along with their therapeutic and practical applications to cancer.

The chapter will also discuss the principles of posttraumatic growth (PTG) and ways to purposefully apply the five domains toward a strategic cancer plan. Research indicates that patients with a positive outlook toward their battle with cancer have better physical, emotional, mental, cognitive, and spiritual outcomes (Knauer et al., 2022; Tofthagen et al., 2022). An intentional approach to cancer with a PTG mindset is ideal, but not intuitive (Branson, 2024). The chapter will also discuss common anti-PTG activities and unproductive emotions that can interfere with one's desire to "do cancer well." Discussion concerning the stigma of showing vulnerability and asking for help will be explored, as well as the benefits of support groups.

Additionally, the author will share testimony of surviving cancer twice (Hodgkins lymphoma [age 26] and breast cancer [age 49]), as well as candid revelations from engaging in both positive and negative coping techniques. The chapter will end with a list of things for loved ones to consider when supporting those dealing with cancer.

## **BACKGROUND**

Cancer has been a noted adversity for humans and animals since the first historical recordings. Mummies found in Egypt present evidence of fossilized tumors and early attempts to treat cancer. The term *cancer* comes from the Greek and refers to the crab, a crustation that has multiple projections that spread outward. Likewise, *oncologist*, the term for a doctor that specializes in the treatment of cancer, comes from the Greek word "oncos," which means "to swell." As medical science advanced and the human body was better understood, early primitive cancer treatments were developed, predominantly the removal of affected body tissues/parts. Rudolf Virchow is credited with developing the science of pathology and Paul Ehrlich with chemotherapy (American Cancer Society, 2018). These discoveries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century set the foundation for today's cancer treatments. Fortunately, the 21<sup>st</sup> century holds the most significant medical advances in history, allowing for extraordinary progress, disease management, and lives saved (Pina-Sanchez et al., 2021). Although most people with cancer now live at least 5 years past their date of diagnosis, cancer is the second leading cause of death in the US and globally (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Dattani et al., 2023).

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