

## Insights of a Survivor who has known Survivors

Having been a participant on the treadmill of healing I began to think that maybe there was another way, a simpler way. There is so much information. How do you select the right information for you? I have had the advantage of working with thousands of cancer patients most of whom struggled to incorporate alternative and complementary therapies into their mainstream treatment. I have observed many cancer patients and carers becoming so stressed while trying to de-stress that their life quality suffered and their pursuit of happiness and healing became counter-productive as a result of trying too hard to heal.

Rather than emphasising that patients consume lots of remedies, vitamins and supplements in the beginning of the cancer journey, my experience has pointed the way towards helping patients to sort out the more human priorities of their healing. *So keep it simple and first things first.*

### Some suggestions and ideas:

Deal with the past and present effects of trauma.

- Set realistic and achievable goals.
- Honestly look at how you handle stress, how you respond to life's difficult situations and conflicts.
- Explore emotional healing heal broken relationships.
- Find peace of mind, purpose, and meaning in life.
- Rebuild or create healthy personal boundaries, self-mastery and healthy resilience.

In some places where the medical system is overloaded these principles could be applied during the lapse time awaiting treatment so that patients were more empowered and self-supporting by the time they had their surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation. The points above are the keys to healing the person rather than treating the cancer itself. It does seem that when patients take charge of their life that their treatments work better and many times unexpected remissions occur.

I have found that informed and empowered patients will make better choices as to the therapies that are right for them; rather than grasping at straws and trying to learn everything as if they had to know it all *yesterday*.

Another reminder – please beware when you search the internet! Although there is some good information, you can easily get into information overload, confusion, and get so overwhelmed that it all seems too hard. Most miracle cure claims are not true or accurate.

*The approach I am suggesting is simple!*

*"People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves without wondering."  
St Augustine*

For many years I pondered on how to best describe the complex healing process that my husband and I experienced. Then, as more patients came – the more insights I had. They also provided me with fascinating information about their cancer journey by completing personal surveys. Then my own enlightening experience of ‘walking in the shoes of a patient’ was a great teaching tool.

Like my husband when he was going through his crisis, during my crises I too found my focus was poor, short-term memory declined and I was so traumatised and dissociated that I could not read more than a page of a book at one time. I could not meditate and relaxation sent me to sleep!

When I understood what was happening to me in *practise, not textbook theory* I realised that the worst thing I could do was to resist and deny what was happening to me. Trying was impossible so like a wounded animal I lay still a lot, contemplated, adapted and accepted. I learned a lot!



*"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them."  
Albert Einstein*

## Response to Illness - Appreciating People's Differences

There are many complex psychological responses that can be triggered when diagnosed with cancer. Different people have different ways of coping and responding – but from research it is clear that a cancer diagnosis registers in the psyche as the threat of loss of life that equals trauma. While some will experience trauma and sink into depression, others may try to cover over the *normal* trauma response with positive thinking. Whatever coping mechanism is tried, the end result is still trauma. At some stage this will need to be addressed during the recovery process!

## What Happens at Diagnosis

1. *A survival response is initiated. This 'Fight or Flight response' and adrenaline release, affects the body's chemistry—initially positively, but fatigue and depression will soon replace this 'high'. The Fight or Flight response is a short lived experience. It also causes tension in the body and fear, like jumping out of the way of a fast-moving bus. The fear is relieved by the fact that the bus missed you – then follows a relaxation response – release and relief. The effect of a cancer diagnosis in relation to *fight or flight* response is that the bus is chasing you 24/7—an exhausting experience.*
2. *Overwhelm can occur as a result of *flight or fight* response and this leads to dissociative states or disconnection from self. Patients often describe this as feeling beside themselves or noticing that suddenly a doctor's voice seemed as if it were coming from down a long tunnel. This is not a good time to make important decisions!*
3. *Fear has many faces. Fear can either throw you into a helpless/hopeless state of denial or into the opposite state of hyperactivity; a state of being where desperation manifests as the flight or fight response or vigilant *fighting spirit*. Fear can also paralyse causing a state of stunned, stoic acceptance.*
4. *Another scenario that I have seen is a *keeping others happy response*. This describes a patient who goes through the motions of doing a lot to recover – but does it for others not self because their heart just isn't in it! Patients have confided to me how stressful it is to be caught in this loop of good intention. Without good communication the situation snowballs, resulting in a patient feeling out of control of their life.*
5. *Check-in and explore how relevant these points are to you. You can discover antidotes and solutions to these issues. Prioritise them in your health restoration plan.*

*These states are all aberrations of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). To give someone the best chance of surviving and thriving as soon as possible after diagnosis, interventions for post trauma counselling and expression therapies should be recommended. If this phase is missed counselling intervention can help at any time throughout your cancer experience.*

*Man is not imprisoned by habit. Great changes in him can be wrought by crisis—once that crisis can be recognized and understood.”*

*Norman Cousins*

## The Three Essential Stages of Healing

The following ‘Three-Stages of Healing Model’ was designed after analysing key common repetitive factors from thousands of questionnaires and stories completed by cancer patients. I saw a need to develop this model because patients were keen to know how to identify the beginning and ending of healing phases. *The Three Stages Model* will help you to gain insight and understanding into attitudes and areas where change is required.

Discovering where you are on the timeline will greatly assist you in creating a realistic and practical health restoration plan. It is a holistic plan that incorporates and honours all systems of medicine.

### Stage One – the Will to Live

#### Striving – Seeking phase

Although the *will to live* is often seen as a positive quality, and in many ways it is, through experience I see the *will to live* phase as a starting point in recovery. Applying *will* is understood to be a forceful activity and the *will to live* phase endorses that quality. If you have seen patients engrossed and committed to continuing this phase you will notice that they become very rigid, resisting other possibilities, even medical treatments that are likely to be successful!

Wilful force uses up a tremendous amount of energy and cancer patients need to conserve rather than spend or waste energy. It is the opposite of letting go. Everyone diagnosed with a life threatening illness will go through all or some of the ‘*Stage One*’ for varying lengths of time. Surprisingly, *this phase* can occur at any time throughout the course of an illness, especially if desperation creeps in anytime after diagnosis. For example someone may have confidently coasted along for years with a slow growing cancer, but it is not until they face reality of a bad prognosis and losing their life, that they decide to become highly proactive to try to preserve life for as long as possible.

Sometimes it is *not* the patient who takes this role but a frightened and loving caregiver or spouse to whom they are closely bonded. This dynamic can be very stressful to both parties. ‘*Seeds of doubt*’ take their own time and rhythm to germinate and we can’t hurry up or slow down this process. I have had women tell me that they placed my breast cancer book, ‘*Women of Silence*’ in the drawer for two or more years before they felt they could read it.

It was the ‘*right*’ time for them although their illness had advanced—*they* were now *ready!* You can’t fake ‘*ready-time*’ because it is a part of a natural rhythm within each person.

*Survival Mode in Stage One* sees decisions based on *fight or flight response - win or lose – do or die*. I describe this as an action stage, but care needs to be taken because the search for the ‘magic bullet’ can easily lead to inflexible, obsessive and stress inducing behaviours.

*Choices made in Stage One* create *busy-ness*, for example, lots of juicing, supplements, rigid dietary regimens and supplement focussed cures plus visits to large numbers of different therapists. This can be a *highly driven, even manic stage of recovery using lots of energy*. Given our current knowledge of trauma and its effects this is not a good time to make radical changes and major decisions. It is a good time to seek counselling

## Summary Stage One

This phase of recovery can contribute to...

- Confusion – too much information too soon and too often leads to an inability to focus on one thing well.
- Increased guilt and bargaining— why me?
- Loss of awareness due to too much trying to “do” and too much “doing”.
- Over striving - Trying to heal on fast forward often helped by Dr Google!
- Self-imposed pressures and demands. The language of *shoulds, musts, do’s, don’ts, and if only I’d...* Absolute rights and wrongs abound especially pertaining to diet.
- Becoming paranoid, neurotic or tunnel visioned and a perfectionist about healing.
- Developing rigidity and inflexibility—fear of doing the wrong thing can be all consuming if you are convinced your life depends upon it. ‘*Joy factor*’ departs.
- All therapies including stress reduction/meditation become rigidly time managed
- An undercurrent of desperation and hurry to fit everything in to the day.
- Burning up energy rather than conserving it.
- Excess striving, trying, effort and shattering disappointment when effort is unrewarded i.e. the cure has been elusive. Guilt and blame are often by-products of this phase.



Stress 101!

## Some Advantages in Stage One

Good short term strategy for some—poor long term strategy for all. Doing something rather than nothing. Gathering some hope and positive placebo. Trying to heal at warp speed sometimes brings personal *ah-ha's!* There are lots of traps and pitfalls during this phase.

## What Happens To the Body and Stress Levels in Stage One

- Resistance, denial, or fear of death inhibits getting on with life.
- If trying to meditate you are often frustrated because of trying too hard.
- Due to post-traumatic stress response, meditation induces sleep. Thoughts often drift and generally you feel “*spaced out*”.
- Due to lack of connection with your body you will think you are relaxed, but will remain very tense and not be aware of it
- You can easily become overwhelmed doing all this healthy stuff and get stressed by trying not to stress. You can feel ‘*jumpy*’ after relaxation.
- Personal boundaries are either non-existent or you have built “walls” to protect yourself – so there can be challenges with expression.



I have spent considerable time discussing this phase because it has proved to be the most troublesome according to many survivors. If patients happen to be trapped in this phase for too long, their pursuits can take on an

addictive almost fundamentalist pattern that screens out all that does not fit into their “mold”.

I recently heard a story about a woman with advanced secondary breast cancer who became trapped in Stage One for several years. Her tumours advanced despite strict adherence to the most perfect diet, meditation, and supplements regimen. On recommendation she visited an overseas complementary oncology clinic for treatment. Her tumour markers plummeted on the new treatments, however she became so stressed and upset because the clinic’s diet wasn’t organic vegan or to her liking, that she checked-out early before completion. She spent her entire time at this clinic in a state of resistance and although she stated she wanted to live and had terrific results, she chose not to return.

We call this a mixed message, where one’s words and actions don’t align.

On return to her home state she immediately booked in for treatments at an upmarket alternative cancer clinic where all of her food requirements could be met.

She died soon after as a result of massive tumour spread.

I like to learn from the stories of others and although this is a very sad story, I have seen many like it. I include it here as a teaching story to demonstrate why it is not helpful to be locked in to Stage One of the three stages of healing model. Flexibility is so crucial to surviving and thriving.



The Trials of Trying to Reduce Stress...

## Stress Reduction Kit



Directions:

1. Place kit on FIRM surface.
2. Follow directions in circle of kit.
3. Repeat step 2 as necessary, or until unconscious.
4. If unconscious, cease stress reduction activity.

### Stage Two – The Will to Heal

#### *The Letting go Phase*

This stage represents transforming from a state of busy-ness, 'doing' and stress to a healthier, more sustaining phase that focuses on self-discovery rather than expending energy and effort or striving and trying too hard. You may still seek cures and treatments during this phase, but your intention has changed.

Although *Stage One* is almost a given for anyone diagnosed with a life challenging illness, ideally it soon gives way to Stage Two the *Will to Heal* - a much more advantageous addition to your healing program where instead of doing more, you do less to achieve more.



The *only* requirement for this stage is that you have chosen life! You choose to live well and to not 'sweat the small stuff', conserve not waste energy, recognise and begin to heal and restore important aspects of your life, for example attending to unresolved grief, damaged relationships, past trauma etc. In this stage patients' report they are more connected with self and their own needs – they live well and die well. What more could we want?



## The Advantages of Stage Two

- Motivation is different—not initiated by either fear or desperation but rather a desire to search for life meaning, values and reconnection with self.

There is less '*doing*' and *more* 'being' in this stage!

- What was considered a treatment starts to become a way of life.
- You begin to develop intuition, awareness, and belief and trust in yourself to know what is right for you.
- You begin to tap in to emotional and innate healing intelligence already programmed into our 70 trillion cells – just waiting to be accessed.
- You will consider and take time to make the right choices for you – no longer on fast forward...
- Developing a sense of control - self-mastery begins.
- You begin to identify and rebuild damaged personal boundaries and heal relationships that are significant to you.
- You begin to live well with your illness, making conscious choices.
- You practise self-care and begin to prioritise your own needs.

## What Happens To the Body and Stress Levels in this Phase...

- Mind, emotions and body become more congruent – remember the body tells the truth!
- Tuning-in to your body means you are more aware when you become tense. You have learned how to diffuse tension when you notice it... choosing to expand your shoulders rather than habitually narrow and *hold on*.
- Meditation, relaxation, awareness, and mindfulness mean that you begin to ‘*space- in*’ rather *than* ‘*space-out*’. PTSD begins to heal so you are more present to life. Overwhelm lessens.
- Resistance begins to dissolve – replaced by expansiveness, adaptability and open ended thinking.
- ‘*Spacing in*’ means you are more present – less disconnected from life and reality. Relaxation has become part of the way you are learning to ‘*be*’ in the world – you take it with you.

*“Leaving your meditation in the house is like leaving your elephant at home yet looking for its footprints in the forest!”*

*Buddhist quote*



### Stage Three –The Will to Know Purpose & Meaning The *Letting Be* Phase

- By this stage the illness no longer rules your life.
- Life without ‘resistance’ becomes a reality. Struggle has evaporated
- You are living very well either with your illness or you may even be in remission.
- Mindfulness and going with the flow is now a part of your daily experience – even if you are having oncology treatments – it is all more easeful.
- There is innate trust and faith that you will be OK whether you live or die.

- Although proactive, you also surrender to possibilities being comfortable with outcomes.
- A sense of self-mastery in your life has developed.
- Your boundaries are strengthening and once restored will allow you to exude a *spiritual resilience and presence* that others notice.
- You are living authentically, true to your-self.
- Relationships with those who matter are healed and communication is working for you.
- You are living your life like a Martial Artist - Life has become more easeful.

*“Be soft in your practice. Think of the method as a fine silvery stream, not a raging waterfall. Follow the stream, have faith in its course. It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there. It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices. Just follow it. Never let it out of your sight. It will take you”.*

*Sheng-yen.*



*Grace Gawler - Tai Chi has been a mainstay of my life. The qualities I have gained from the practise have seen me through my darkest nights of the soul. I have learned resilience, when to yield and when to stand up for self and so much more...*

## Summary.....

### ✚ *Stage One the Will to Live – ‘Striving – Seeking’.*

*This phase is born out of a strong desire of not wanting to die, and is a survival instinct often motivated by fear. A busy phase - it needs to transform to a more easeful way of being.*

### ✚ *Imagine a bridge spanning the will to live (initially activated out of fear) and the will to heal (activated out of awareness). When you begin to cross the bridge, you can begin to transform your life through the illness rather than passively lose your life to it!*

### ✚ *Stage Two the Will to Heal – The ‘Letting Go’ phase is more motivated by belief in self, healthy instinct and intuition, and initiated by an inner awareness and innate desire for personal change and transformation in order to heal. Everything slows down...time to think and be.*

If fear is acknowledged and healing responses are activated, the doorway to transformation can be opened. This is quite different from seeking the “magic bullet” and grasping desperately for “the cure”.

### ✚ *Stage three Knowing your Meaning and Purpose the ‘Letting Be’ phase is living in trust that all is as it should be. You are living true to yourself with a sense of self mastery and choice. You are centred, grounded and life is more easeful.*

- I have seen many people reach Stage in their recovery, and experience a complete turnaround in their disease.
- Many have said how much their life quality improved and they were content with that whatever time they had left because they had really found a purpose in life.
- Others have said that cancer had almost become incidental – even those living with advanced disease. One patient said: “Using Grace’s model, the focus became about living in the now – not the past or the future. It seemed a simple change – but the hardest thing I have ever done.”
- And finally – Every morning I awake and take a deep breath. I no longer think about cancer and how my life might be shortened. I think: “Here I am – another day on earth. How will I spend it, with whom shall I spend it? I bless the fact that I have bought precious time to be here. I never forget to take time and “smell the roses”!

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