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Cancer: Survivorship and Sailing on



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ABSTRACT

This short work looks at the concept of survivorship and how post-diagnosis cancer patients can regain their sense of hope and optimism, in order to carry on with their lives and help others in the process. The author speaks about the free site www.cansurviving.com which was created in order to try to fill a gap in what was available on the Web, linking this with her own work over the years as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.



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Sailing on...This is at the heart of the big question which confronts anyone given a potentially life-threatening diagnosis. There is of course the wish to survive, and then the accompanying thought: what is survivorship for? How does one regain a sense of thriving in this new world opened up by diagnosis? As Bion said (1982, p.128) the fears can be numberless 'I see them in the watch-fires of a thousand sleepless nights, for the soul goes marching on'. The logo for the site www.cansurviving.com is a little boat, with a compass superimposed on the image, and a background of a calm sea. This international group built site which currently has nearly 700 members sees itself as existing as a sort of chandlery by the waterside, so that each person may load up their own little boat with what they need to move on. 'Cansurviving' makes use of the present participle of the verb to survive, and we consider this to be a vital active principle, where our members and people who access the site from 46 countries now can feel empowered rather than helpless after the shock of diagnosis. Recently someone said the site had been recommended to him in Australia by some colleagues in the USA who said it was 'the best site on the web for healing cancer'. Since there are over 9m of them (to date) that's quite an accolade. We work as a team, majoring on this question of the purpose of survivorship, which we consider to be a new state of mind where one gives back to others after the shock of diagnosis has subsided. For any person, a cancer diagnosis is a shock and a trauma. Any shock stops thinking and for a time the shock of diagnosis can paralyze a person's capacity to carry on in a constructive way with the next part of their life. This may be linked as I have said in earlier publications with post-traumatic stress disorder. On this international group built site, we discuss ways of proceeding and explore complementary and alternative treatments to aid the healing process.

Why Me?

Why me? This may well be a question. And help! 'what can I do now?' For the understanding of those who have built this site, starting from the Site Founder Judith Edwards onwards, both the development of cancer and the kick-starting of the healing process are multi-factorial issues, and there are no cast-iron guarantees offered in any route, orthodox or alternative, despite what may be said, by the medical profession or by those well-intentioned people who tell one about their own 'journey'. What is vital is for a renewed sense of self-empowerment to grow, despite inevitable setbacks, in order for body, mind and spirit to be parts of the healing process. As a psychoanalytic psychotherapist for over thirty years, I have found the processes of being contained, and thus being able over time to engender one's own sense of

hope and empowerment, to be constructive and indeed vital for change and growth to take place. We hope that the site will open doors to different ways of thinking which can be used together to aid both physical and mental health, so that 'survivorship' becomes meaningful, not just a matter of 'not dying'. We link with other sites promoting cancer healing in order to give our members the widest view possible, (although avoiding where we can the chest-beating 'I beat Cancer' types of site) - but from the vantage point of one site to which they may return and browse freely, again and again, over the years. The proof of the efficacy of this approach lies in the number of people who access the site from all over the world. There are many forums on the site, which have grown as the site itself has developed, dealing with diet and the body, mindset, and the idea that adopting some sort of 'spiritual' practice also helps in sailing on.

Will you or Won't You?

This important forum deals with the elephant in the room, dying and death. It was a late arrival on the site: of course, none of us will escape that eventual destination, whether we have cancer or not. The poet Seamus Heaney said to his wife just before he died 'noli timere' - don't be scared...In a sense this sums up what we feel and try to promote on the site, that life is all about not being scared into paralysis, lying back and gasping 'heal me'. This is similar to the way in which someone needs to be 'psychologically minded' if they are going to benefit from psychoanalytic work - it is a two-person project from the beginning. The impetus to 'stay curious' may be the foundation for a path that is taken up despite contrary advice from well-meaning people. What is vital is for the individual to find ways to go forward. Going forward together, in a group is a helpful method of finding our What Comes Next. There is no marked road: each person needs to find it for themselves, but in the company of others. As Gesell found out nearly a hundred years ago with the advent of accurate photographs, a baby learning to crawl employs 25 different movements, and some of these are backwards. No amount of aggressive 'thinking positive' will help people on the 'going backwards' days - they are part of the pattern, as we say, and we have a forum about Depression on the site too. 'Anything to hold at bay the dark and sombre world of thought' (Bion, op.cit. p.286) Not for nothing was this site called as remarked previously 'the best site on the web for healing cancer'. It bangs no one person's drum, sells no one person's point of view or book or video, does not deny difficulty, but surveys the field so that members can browse and find their own way, from our central hub-- just as no two psychoanalytic encounters are the same, so no two

paths forward are the same for people after diagnosis- the vital thing is to walk (and that's great exercise too). As a member from Colombia said when she posted a video about a young Vietnamese veteran who learned to run from being flat on his back 'never, ever give up'. As we recently have heard, many 'vets' take their own lives because they do not find a way way to a position of optimism. Scientific studies now back up the notion that fear promotes disease, and hope promotes health. On the Research forum of the site, headed by our respected international researcher Teleny, we try to be as up to date as possible with what is emerging in terms of how to engender health.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion must be that there are no 'magic bullets' no 'this is the only way' mantras which can protect the newly diagnosed from feeling that the world has been turned upside down. Many people come into psychoanalytic psychotherapy, not because of cancer diagnosis, but because some event has turned their own world upside down. There need to be new ways of thinking about a new situation. Help is needed, and while this site had small beginnings, its growth and capacity to keep thriving demonstrates these points well. While there is a temptation, as the great psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion said about his own part in World War One 'to take shelter instinctively in mindlessness' (Bion, 1982, p. 130) we can also as he suggests help ourselves to 'become active and luminous in accordance with the movements of forces concealed below'. (Bion, *ibid.* p.216). Together we can learn to thrive again.

REFERENCES

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