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Finding Happiness in a Storm

I cannot change the wind, but I can adjust my sails.—Source
unknown

The true voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.—Marcel Proust, 1871

Illness can feel like a fierce storm, entering your life uninvited and with little warning, indiscriminately threatening or destroying many pleasures and hopes you hold dear. And then, during sickness and recovery, or even if the illness is behind you, the possibility that your disease might rob you of every earthly joy continues to cloud your life. I offer the notion of “happiness in a storm” as a metaphor for any happiness in the midst of difficulties accompanying your diagnosis, evaluation, treatment, recovery, or long-term survivorship. Without a doubt, illness is bad, yet, survivorship —from the time of diagnosis and for the balance of life—can include times of great joy among the hardships. You *can* find happiness.

Everyone wants happiness, but what is happiness? What is this entity so fundamental that its pursuit is one of the three basic inalienable rights of Americans, alongside life and liberty? And what’s the difference between *feeling* happy and *being* happy? In overly simplistic terms, “feel-

reminder of my progress. Every little step forward is worthy of celebrating. Life is worth celebrating.
Develop mottoes that help you do the right thing.

Wendy's Mottoes for Taking Action

- If I can do the physically hard stuff to get well (like take my cancer treatments), surely I can do the physically easy stuff to get well and stay well (like getting exercise, eating well, resting, and reporting worrisome symptoms to my doctor).
- Doing the right thing can help me feel better while helping me get better and stay better. I don't like feeling bad, so if I can do something to keep from feeling bad, I should do it.
- My actions are one element of my healing under my complete control. Doing the right thing helps stack the odds in my favor and gives me maximum control over my life.
- I've worked too hard and sacrificed too much to stop here. A lot of other people have, too. It doesn't make sense to do the right thing only half the time.
- Doing the right thing is the best gift I could ever give to the people I love. Although I don't owe anyone anything, I want to show my family and friends how much I appreciate them. Doing the right thing is the most powerful and meaningful way for me to express my love.
- *Just do it!* When arguing, explaining, or cajoling fail, and when my logical or inspiring mantras aren't working, I think of the Nike directive, and I make sure I do the right thing.

What mottoes help you do the right thing?

With sound knowledge and genuine hope, you can act in ways that help you get good care and live fully. But even when you are doing everything right, you may not feel happy. Finding happiness when life is hard is the subject of the closing chapter.

ing happy" is when you feel good emotionally for the moment. In contrast, "being happy" is an overarching sense of wholeness of your body, mind, and spirit that makes you glad to be alive. When you are truly happy, a sense emanates from within you that things are right in the world. Happiness in a storm is about both feeling happy and being happy when life is hard.

As a youngster, I learned that the preamble to America's Declaration of Independence doesn't guarantee happiness, only the right to *pursue* happiness. It's up to each individual to determine if and how to pursue happiness. In many circumstances, but especially when you are sick, you can't find happiness by going back to the last place you remember having it. It's not something you can buy with a dollar or nail down with a hammer. Once found, you can't hold on to happiness the way you can wrap your arms securely around a puppy and hold tight. As with your hopes, your happiness is continually redefined, re-created or rediscovered again and again as you and your circumstances evolve.

During and after illness, your challenge lies in finding happiness now, in the life you have, even though it may not be the life path you wanted, prepared for, or expected. Don't compound your misfortune by letting your pain keep you from seeing or feeling the real happiness your illness allows. It would be a tragedy if you couldn't experience the surprising little joys that spritz survivors like an ocean spray and the secrets for happiness discovered in hard times.

Happiness during treatment and recovery is often a consequence of moving through and beyond unpleasant sensations or situations. When your headache resolves, you feel happy. When a worrisome lump turns out to be nothing, you celebrate. Happiness is also tied to various emotions such as gratitude for your treatments and caregivers, or a sense of accomplishment after completing a round of treatment. Soaking in a warm bath that soothes your aching muscles or receiving a loved one's gentle kiss on your forehead can lead you to a type of happiness that is hardy like a desert flower. In contrast, walking unaided after months of physical therapy or adopting a child after years of unsuccessful fertility treatments can lead to happiness inextricably tied to preceding pain and grief, and effort and patience. These joys are like jewels that are precious

not only on account of their brilliant luster but also because of the extraordinary difficulty in mining and then sculpting them. Yet another source of happiness is the possibility of so-called silver linings, good things coming out of bad times.

When I talk about my silver linings—being at home with my kids and discovering writing, having time to play my violin, and learning to cook—someone invariably asks, "Was it worth it?" They want to know if I would have chosen to develop lymphoma if I'd known ahead of time all the blessings that were going to come out of my illness. I know that they mean well and are trying to help me feel better about what's happened, but their question troubled me until I realized it made no sense. Any suggestion that my cancer was worth it (or that I might ever choose it) reflects their desire to give me a sense of control in a situation that was beyond my control. Normal people don't choose illness or injury. It just happens. Cancer happened to me. My choice lies in the life I live after cancer.

Moments of feeling good can occur *despite* the storm, such as when I laughed at my husband's well-timed joke while we awaited my surgery, or when I swayed in rhythm to my favorite tune playing on the car radio and forgot about my leg pain. Precious are the joys that have arisen *because* of the storm, such as when I learned that my posttreatment scans were clear. On what was an ordinary weekday for most people, the exhilarating news of my remission made me feel like I was walking on air.

Sweet as it is, feeling happy is a limited goal because it is short-lived. The real challenge in illness is *being happy*. Discomforts, losses, and unwanted changes tend to affect your view of the world in ways that make it hard to be happy. This is especially so when you are newly diagnosed, struggling with complications or recurrence, or facing terminal disease. You can't expect to experience happiness if you have searing pain. Terror leaves no space for happiness. If the chemistry of your brain is affected in ways that block happiness, strong willpower and spiritual faith may be unable to lift your spirit in joy. Take heart; you can make changes

Illness and injury happen. Illness or injury happened to you. Your choice lies in the life you live now.

that can help you find some happiness again, even during the toughest times. This happiness derives at least partly from a life-enhancing shift in your perception of yourself and of the world around you that brings color to darkness and order to chaos. Whether it is mixed with other complex feelings or experienced as pure joy, and whether it is a fleeting feeling or an enduring way of life, happiness in a storm makes life worth fighting for.

How, exactly, do you find happiness in a storm? What do you need to do, think, feel, or say today in order to find happiness while you are going through your treatment or recovery, or while living with chronic disease? Chances are that opportunities for happiness are right in front of you. Maybe you've forgotten how to enjoy your favorite pastimes. You don't normally think of being able to "forget" something like working on your stamp collection or playing your guitar, but patients easily get lost in their pain, loss, and stress. In cases like these, the exercise of writing your own "personal happiness list" may be all you need to jog your memory and reintroduce delights into your daily diet. You might need to explore different ways of seeing yourself and the world around you. In doing so, you may discover new types of happiness waiting to be tapped, such as the happiness of sharing invigorating ideas and nascent hopes with new friends, or the happiness of knowing love in a whole new way. Happiness in a storm is never about enjoying your illness but embracing your life within the limits of your illness, and figuring out how to feel happy whenever possible.

Reading others' personal stories of happiness after illness may help guide you in refurbishing your old recipes of happiness and creating new ones. In my case, my years of observing and talking with other survivors, reading and writing about survivorship, praying alone and with friends, and much trial and error have led me to the mantras and methods that have been helping me in my pursuit of happiness. The stories that follow may help you identify obstacles to your joys and how to overcome them. Unlike following a cookie recipe, however, you can't just mimic the scenarios. Why not? The settings—the actions, attitudes, conversations, and situations—that make you happy are unique to you.

My hope is that you'll recognize something familiar in these stories,

and you'll be sensitized to the many opportunities you have for finding and creating joy in your life. If my situation is completely foreign to yours, my outlook your polar opposite, and my mantras ring false, the contrast can serve to help clarify what *will* help you. For example, although my selection of Bach's partitas for violin may not excite you in the least, the idea of listening to music may lead you to play your old Beatles recordings because they always put you in a good mood! As you read this chapter, look to your future with optimism that you can find happiness again. Think about happiness and nurture your hope that it is possible to experience happiness in a storm.



Make a list of things and activities that used to bring you happiness. Make a list of new things that might bring you happiness.



Healthy Survivorship, Choice, and Happiness

For me, Healthy Survivorship is a necessary condition of happiness. I don't think I can be happy until I first feel confident that I am getting good care and doing what I can to heal. But Healthy Survivorship, alone, is not enough. Even when I'm confidently doing everything possible to ensure the best outcome in all spheres of my life, I still may be miserable. In addition to taking steps to get good care and live fully, I must also take steps to set the stage for happiness. I must actively seek out and create joy.

When times are tough, happiness is a choice you make and not an automatic feeling. Although developing cancer was a bad deal, I learned early on that I don't have to feel sad, scared, angry, or unhappy all the time. The knowledge-hope-action approach that has helped me find relief from both my nausea and my frustration of fatigue has also helped me find oasis after oasis of joy after cancer. First, I've obtained knowledge about the obstacles to happiness that arise during illness, and how to overcome them. Then I've nourished my belief that I can reshape my outlook and create situations to bring me happiness during treatment