

Chapter 27 – Reframing for the cancer hero

In the previous chapter Eileen was able to draw on an inner strength—her faith and the support of loved ones—to reframe the thought “I can’t do this treatment.” She moved from a position of feeling powerless to seeing the greater reality of the situation. Her reframe, which is both rationale and kind, was essentially, “This is difficult, but I don’t have to do it all myself.” By using a reframe consistent with her personality and spiritual view, Eileen felt more empowered and her burden was lightened.

There are other ways to reframe the thought “It’s no use. I don’t have the strength to get through this.” The most effective way for any one individual will depend on their personality. Many people who attend the weekends are very proactive in their approach to the cancer diagnosis. They advocate for themselves and get the best medical care in addition to empowering themselves with specific healing techniques. Their approach is laudable for its comprehensive and effective path towards healing body, mind, and spirit. But if this “I’m going to beat cancer” mentality is taken to the extreme, the proactivity can become an obsession. Then the most helpful reframe is one that draws on a healthy degree of detachment.

To illustrate the dilemma of trying to be too controlling, we have made up a character called the Cancer Hero, who wants to be just like Lance Armstrong. People who are cancer heroes turn their life into a Tour de France. They think that if Lance can push himself through the pain of grinding up a mountain for hours, they should be able get up at 5:00 AM to go for a 10-mile run, then meditate for the next four hours.

The Cancer Hero may spend the rest of the day drinking freshly squeezed vegetable juices, then search the Internet for hours at night, looking for the magic cure. In their spare time, Cancer Heroes will raise more money for research than anyone else and give talks about their experience at every opportunity. Partaking in any of these activities is admirable—as long as there is a healthy balance.

The shortcomings of a Cancer Hero include failing to appreciate moments of beauty in life, while they push themselves too far while on treatment. Cancer Heroes loves to fight. The challenge of chemotherapy can ignite their fiery determination. They may resolve to push through the side effects with superhuman effort, just as Lance Armstrong drove himself. This strength

and determination are laudable and can carry the Cancer Hero a long way up the mountain, but each human body has its limits. Some types of chemotherapy will cause too much stress on the cellular matrix of certain individuals. The wise approach is to modify the chemotherapy.

Similarly, the human psyche has its limits. Wearing the Cancer Hero mask may work for the first few months, but most people will reach a point in an intense treatment schedule when they physically can't go on. When the wisdom of the body speaks up and says, "I don't have the strength to get through this," while another part of their psyche shouts back, "I'll do anything to beat this cancer."

Initially, the Cancer Hero may suppress the thought that they have limits, but the wise voice won't be silenced, especially if our hero is becoming depleted physically and emotionally. Eventually, the voice of wisdom and the Cancer Hero persona will clash in a psychological battle of mythic proportions. The Cancer Hero can't untangle himself from this psychological impasse.

Steven Lobel captures the Cancer Hero's dilemma with great humor in a play based on his own life after being diagnosed with recurrent testicular cancer that required high-dose chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. He tells the true story of attending a hospital picnic for cancer survivors. On stage, he dons the cap and tight spandex outfit of a professional cyclist and contemplates his life's purpose.

"I survived my cancer. But what do I win? Lance Armstrong got the Tour de France, speaking gigs, and a ghostwriter. Everyone else gets all this wisdom and depth that only you derive from cancer, but what do I get? If I wasn't going to become a better person because of all of those procedures then I sure as hell better win some kind of competition. Competition! I need to be a hero. A role model. A SURVIVOR! I know that I will probably never be the best role model or ideal survivor—but I will die trying."

Steven picks up a hula hoop. He explains to the audience that picnic organizers have just announced "The Stem Cell Transplant Reunion Picnic Hula Hoop Contest", and he's there to win at all costs.

"Eight un-ironic, cute little daughters of stem cell transplant patients versus Brian Lobel, the world's most competitive cancer survivor. A race to the finish, a fight to the death. Winner take all—a Coleman folding lawn chair. They were nothing. The world needed to see who the real cancer-survivor-

turned-hula-hoop-champion was... and so, I hula'd. [Brian begins to hula.] If it was a title that Lance Armstrong would never hold, I would hold it, and so I focused, intensely, passionately..."

The competition is stiff, but slowly Brian is outlasting his much younger competitors until, with only three contestants still in the running, he begins to see his folly. He starts to think about his mother and how she's held his hand through the toughest point in the chemotherapy. He snaps out of his reminiscence and tells himself, "Focus, Brian!"

He sneers at the two remaining girls. The judges ask the three to take a giant step to the right in an attempt to interrupt their concentration. Brian leaps right, focused on his goal. One of the girls loses her hoop. He has only one girl left to beat. His mind drifts again to all the visitors coming in to see him in the hospital, laughing and listening with love and tenderness. He realizes that life is not a competition. A tear comes to his eye and his hoop drops to the ground. Brian walks away feeling peaceful and happy. As it turns out, the girl who outlasted him was disqualified and Brian actually won the prize.

Brian's approach is refreshing in its honesty and humor. He makes an important point in highlighting how inadequate he felt when he compared himself to Lance Armstrong. This is a valuable insight—that there is no way that we can ever be a hero like anyone other than our true self. Finding our way through a labyrinth of suffering, fear, and pain and confronting our own demons is the only way that we can go. In this way, each person is an extraordinary hero in his or her own right.

We've seen Cancer Hero personalities find ways to reframe their intense feelings with a peaceful approach. Carol, a French-Canadian woman with breast cancer, had a moment of insight when in the midst of chemotherapy she had the very rational thought that maybe the treatment was too much for her.

At that moment, her thinking changed from, "I have to do this" to "I don't know if I can." Suddenly a great pressure was released and she felt liberated—she could let go of the demanding voice within. She acknowledged her needs and asked for help. Her nausea medication was adjusted, she breezed through the chemotherapy, and by the next cycle of treatment, she could eat whatever I wanted.

Kathy told a similar story. The first time she was treated for Hodgkin's lymphoma, she regarded her chemo as an inconvenience. In classic Cancer Hero fashion, she never really considered her own mortality. When she later developed simultaneous recurrent lymphoma and liver failure, she was shaken to the core. There appeared to be no reasonable treatment options, both diseases directly threatened her life. Like the Cancer Hero being pushed beyond his limits, she felt that she was doing absolutely everything possible for herself but was getting nowhere. This is the point where positive and healthy reframing is critical.

“Being a strong person, I had to learn how to surrender to the possibility that I might die. That is a fact. So I couldn't deny that part, either. So to reframe, I had to go really close to the thought that ‘maybe I won't survive’ before I came to peace with this.” Kathy was able to relax into the unknown. Instead of trying to control everything, she could accept and love herself for how she was feeling. When situations arose requiring a decision or action, her natural intelligence guided her in practical ways. She had shed a whole layer of unnecessary suffering and self-torment. When Kathy let go of trying to control everything, her body was better able to heal, and through her approach she is a walking miracle several years later.