

## **Chapter 29 – Reframing “You’re supposed to stay positive”**

“Being positive” has its place on the cancer journey. People who maintain a happy demeanour and envisioning a hopeful future usually use active coping strategies like negotiating for the best care from the medical system. They take better care of their bodies and nurture their relationships with others. Feeling happier boosts immune system function and helps unleash the innate healing potential in their bodies. With a better attitude, they can see through difficult scenarios more easily, taking appropriate action when necessary. It’s definitely helpful to have a positive attitude but taken too far the pressure to always be positive can be exhausting.

Unfortunately there can be a lot of pressure to stay positive. People are inundated with catch phrases like “the power of positive thinking” and “the mind-body connection”. Most people with a cancer diagnosis don’t want to see their family and friends suffer and so often they will don the happy mask.

Then reality arrives. Contemplating mortality, mourning the loss of the previous life, dealing with physical side effects, worrying about the future and the effect of a diagnosis on family members all weigh heavily. Sometimes it’s hard to hold the happy mask up. It’s normal and expected to experience the wide range of emotions that accompany a cancer diagnosis. Under the happy mask the true face can be contorted by anger and fear, or tear up in sadness.

If you believe that you should remain positive even when you’re feeling awful you’ll end up wrestling with yourself. You’ll try desperately to hold up the happy mask, straining with all your might to fulfill the expectations of yourself and others. The reality of the situation will occasionally pull you down as you face the multiple stressors of cancer.

By learning to reframe the distressing thought, “I have to stay positive all the time,” you can learn to align yourself with the truth and be more genuine. By looking at the distressing thought “I have to stay positive” and the influence it has on your feelings, you can begin the process of looking at the whole situation with wisdom and kindness.

We explore this common issue in our reframing lecture. Up on the screen, in the first column under the heading “Mindful of distressing thoughts”, comes

up the line, “They say you’re supposed to stay positive, but I feel awful, angry, helpless, and filled with despair. I’m afraid that I’m making this worse.” There is quiet in the room. People are shifting in their seats; a furrow appears in the collective eyebrow.

Tim asks if anyone can identify with this thought. At least half the participants raise their hands.

I start by trying to put them at ease. “This is a complex issue. First realize that there may be lots of truth to this thought. For instance, ‘feeling helpless’ might make things worse. If you allow yourself to get stuck in the muck and you just stay there, it’s just not good for anybody. We know that. At the same time, just putting on a happy mask, denying the underlying emotions, doesn’t seem wise either.

“We want to start with acknowledging the truth—in this situation you’re feeling awful. So let’s just take it one step at a time. The first question in the middle column is: What emotions come up when you’re thinking, ‘I feel awful and I’m making this worse?’”

I slump forward, shoulders sagging, head down, eyes closed, swaying back and forth. I’m portraying a picture of unhappiness and internal turmoil. “What emotion comes up when you think this way?”

Someone volunteers, “Guilty.” I reply, “Yes, the tension over what I should be doing is placed on top of the underlying difficult emotions.”

The group is fired up now and there’s a barrage of answers to the question about what emotion follows the distressing thought: “Despair”, “Helplessness”, “Angry,” “You’re blaming yourself”.

Tim quickly adds another distressing thought: “I’m the cause of my own problem.”

I raise my voice over the crowd. “You can cycle this thought so many different directions, telling yourself more stories about how you should feel.”

The room is heating up. People are leaning forward in their chairs, talking to each other all at once. The comments are arriving on top of each other. “You can’t even ask for help. I’m supposed to be happy so I can’t even ask for

help.” “Yeah. Ungrateful.” “I’ve been in that place.” Tim is adding more distressing thoughts: “Nobody wants to be around me because I’m so grumpy.”

This internal conversation has been held inside their minds for too long and really wants to get out now. People are reliving their frustrations in the cycle of talking themselves and the group is going into a mini frenzy.

I jump in. “We’ll stop you there because you could just keep on going. It’s easy to get into a downward spiral with this thought”

The next question in the second column of the exercise is about how this thought can affect the body. “If you allow yourself to get caught in this downward spiral your body loses energy.” People nod their head in agreement.

The third question is, “So is it harmful or helpful to think this way?”

The group doesn’t want to answer the question yet. Several people have an opinion they want to express about this predicament of feeling terrible and thinking you should feel positive.

A thin elderly lady with breast cancer starts off. Because her view of the world has been shaped with years experience she wants to challenge the premise that trying to be positive all the time is beneficial. “I think you need to feel those negative emotions. If not, you’re at a point of denial. And we all go through these emotions. And all of a sudden you say, ‘I’ve got to do something about this. I can’t keep on feeling sorry for myself.’ But first you go through the ‘Why me?’ phase.”

I want to emphasize the difficult feeling are expected. “It’s normal and natural to go through these emotions. Sometimes you’re going to hold onto them for a period of time. And if you’re really down you may decide to see a professional. But learning to observe your thoughts with mindfulness is the first step. Then you can ask yourself, ‘Is it helpful to think this way?’ With insight, you will see the thought itself as the cause of your inner conflict. Next comes the question: how can I reframe this? Can I see life from a bigger perspective that will allow me to feel better? The fact is it isn’t helpful to be ruminating ‘I feel awful but I should be positive’ over and over again.”

Carol, a young woman recovering from chemotherapy, wants to follow up on the comment from the wise older woman about acknowledging the negative emotions. “I call it letting the poison out. I read a lot of books about the mind-body connection and I do believe in it, but there are times when you just don’t feel right—you know, you don’t feel good. But if you let out these emotions it’s positive because you’re not letting them stress you out. You’re releasing the bad mood. The alternative is you can wallow in the bad mood until it becomes ridiculous. Then you’ve had enough of it. It’s like eating too much chocolate.”

Tim tells the group a story about a man who had been repeatedly beaten by his father and suffered severe depression as an adult. This man joined one of Tim’s men’s groups. One evening at the low of a depression and feeling no way out he told the group how awful he felt. Tim told the man to go 100 percent into his despair – to let the despair completely take over him. The man began to cry and wail, holding his gut and surrounded by the other men. While he writhed, he suddenly had an insight. He could clearly see a childhood belief that his own anger was supposedly so intense that it could blow up the entire world like a nuclear explosion. Having made this realization and released this knot of energy in a long fit of grief and anger he began to feel better. He had gained insight and continued on the healing journey.

Tim pointed out that when we resist our deep sadness for a long time, it will always chase after us. But once we embrace it, the emotion will flow through us. Quoting one of the participants at the retreat “What you resist persists and what you can embrace transforms.”

Kathy, a 47-year-old executive, speaks next. She has been treated for cancer twice and now works with the ongoing problems with liver failure. She points up at the thought in the first column and says . “Two of the most harmful words in that statement are ‘supposed to.’” She then recounts her experience with cancer the first time. “All her neighbours marvelled at how she got through cancer. They said, ‘She’s so up, it’s so wonderful.’ Then a friend went through cancer treatment and she was in despair. And my friends said, ‘Kathy, you have to talk to her because she’s not handling it’. And I said, ‘She’s handling it the way she needs to handle it.’

Kathy continues “You hear that ‘supposed to’ all the time. You’re not supposed to react that way, but you know what? It’s me. That’s who I am. And this is how I’m going to react.” Kathy is not going to try to deceive anyone—especially herself. People recognize the truth and we can feel the room breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Patty has lived a full life, from growing beyond a dysfunctional family to deciding to marry a loving man who has end-stage prostate cancer. Patty looks over at Kathy. “I agree. For me, I was reading in a book about a woman who lets herself grieve, and fall into it. Every day she gives herself 15 minutes to really feel all her pain. At the end of 15 minutes, if that doesn’t do it for her she gives herself another 15 minutes. But then she says ‘enough is enough’ and brings herself out of it.”

Patty continues, “For me when I’ve given myself enough time to grieve I decide to go for a walk, or get a change of scenery or phone someone who can listen to me. And this works for me. So I let myself feel awful. I’m honouring the grief, then I take steps to feel better, but only after I feel the pain. Because, if you ignore the pain, then you’re not doing yourself a favour. In fact, you’re trivializing the situation, which is more harmful than grieving it.”

Tim steps forward to clarify a teaching point. “We need to learn to separate thinking and feeling. The feelings are going to be there and they’re going to go up and down. But when we put a label on the emotion and judge ourselves as bad for having that emotion, we’re creating an extra level of suffering.”

I continue with the exercise “What is the distortion in the thought: ‘They say you’re supposed to stay positive, but I feel awful, angry, helpless and filled with despair. I’m afraid that I’m making this worse?’”

Christine responds, “‘They say you’re supposed to...’ Who says? We don’t have to choose to act a certain way just because society thinks we should.”

I encourage this type of rationale thinking “Right. I want those lawyer types to cross examine this first sentence. What is the logical flaw in ‘People say you have to stay positive’?”

Stuart the lawyer answers directly. “We overgeneralize when we say the word ‘should’. Each person has their own way of handling a situation. You can’t expect everyone to do it the same way. That would be unrealistic.”

I add “My red flag goes up when there is a ‘should’ in a sentence. Or ‘supposed to’ or ‘always’ or ‘have to’. I’m uncomfortable with that black-and-white thinking.”

Another young woman who’s supporting her husband on the weekend points out the consequences of suppressing our emotions: “When I hold back what I’m really feeling I actually crash even harder when I do crash.”

Tim uses his hands (one pushing up and the other pushing down) to illustrate what happens with suppression. “There’s a reason for those emotions. They are flowing through us. There’s grief. There’s loss. We need to honor them, and let them flow. And then you can feel better. There is a natural process that our emotions take us on but when our thinking is distorted, we can get stuck.”

I ask “So how do we reframe that one? How do we work with this real life scenario? What would you say to that person feeling awful and guilty about not being positive? How could they look at the scenario in a bigger way?”

Christine, who spent years debilitated from her cancer before making a miraculous recovery, starts the reframing process “It’s tough to be positive all the time. I just can’t be positive 100 percent of the day. And there’s no data that feeling awful is necessarily making me worse.”

Cheryl Ann, who worked long hard hours to move up the corporate ladder before she developed leukemia, comments, “Sometimes I think back to before my diagnosis when I was working big hours. I would have days when I was off emotionally for no reason at all. So I would say in this situation ‘This is just an off time for me. Maybe it’s not related to cancer at all.’”

I echo Cheryl Ann’s comment. “Yeah, it’s normal to have an off day. That’s human. Well done. Okay, so this is the reframe Tim and I came up with [pointing up at the third column on the screen]: ‘It’s natural to have strong and negative feelings. I’m learning to comfort myself and to ask for support from others. I can work with my state of mind and this helps.’”

Tim then refers to some images used in a meditation earlier in the day. “Remember when we did the visualisation of a hurricane over the ocean? At the level of the water, there’s a lot of psychological turbulence. But 40 feet down or from the sky above, there is great peace. When you have this emotional turmoil in your life you can put some space around it. You can observe yourself in distress. Then you can be kind to yourself. Rather than feeling guilty about it and being hard on yourself, which compounds the problem, that’s the time for kindness and love and slowing down. Then you can be logical and say, ‘I’ll get through this, I need to take care of myself.’”

“What we say in the psychology of meditation is that everything is workable. There is nothing that isn’t workable. We can actually work with the energy as it is. But when we tell ourselves that we can’t then we get into trouble.

“Instead you can talk to yourself: ‘I don’t have to be a certain way. I don’t have to be perfect. I don’t have to always feel good. There’s no should’. Instead I honour what is.”

Cheryl Ann, the executive turned charity founder, has just had an “aha!” moment. “Something here really resonated for me. Usually I shock myself when I am feeling negative. I try to quickly shut it away and say, ‘I don’t want to feel this way.’ Nobody wants to see those negative things, right? But I can actually hold onto those emotions. I can say to myself, ‘At this moment in time that is what I’m feeling. I’m going through it.’ You can then say ‘What I am going to do?’ But it starts by just deciding to hold the emotions.”

Tim adds “You look at things. That’s what meditation does. You let it arise, you look at it, feel it, let it go. Don’t make a storyline about it, don’t make logic around it, just see it, feel it, let it go. Then things move through you and your natural growth takes its place. Natural healing occurs.”