

After the Storm:

Why Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Is One of Cancer's Hidden Tolls

Experiencing cancer, either personally or as a caregiver, is a harrowing experience in and of itself. However, cancer's effects aren't always limited to the symptoms of the disease itself. It can also take a mental and emotional toll in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

By Joni Aldrich

Chances are, when you hear about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), you think of the brave men and women in our armed forces who sidestep land mines and dodge enemy fire overseas. Yet it's estimated by one major cancer facility that up to 47 percent of cancer survivors fit the criteria for PTSD. And the term is being used in reference to cancer caregivers, too. After all, the psychiatric definition of trauma is simply "an event outside normal human experience"—and while none of us go through life without being touched by the darkness that is cancer, it is, by no standard, *normal*.

So what, exactly, is PTSD? First of all, any overwhelming life experience can trigger PTSD, especially if the event is perceived as unpredictable and uncontrollable. Post-traumatic stress disorder can affect those who personally experience the catastrophe, those who witness it, and those who pick up the pieces afterward. Thus, as it relates to cancer, it can occur in friends and family members who supported the patient through his or her trauma.

If such a high percentage of cancer survivors suffer from PTSD, imagine the impact cancer has on caregivers who have lost their loved ones to the disease. In fact, a recent report from one psychiatric website highlighted the opinion that caregivers of cancer patients may suffer *more* mental health issues and long-term quality of life impairment than the cancer survivors themselves.

When I first heard the term PTSD used in reference to cancer survivors and their caregivers, it took me some time to comprehend the correlation. If you stop to think about it, during a cancer war, don't the patients and their support staff go through "mine fields" daily? And—no matter how much treatment facilities camouflage a chemo room with bright colors and cheery paintings—it still has all of the ambience of a war zone.

I speak from experience. In 2006, my husband, Gordon, lost his two-year battle with cancer. My book *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) tells the story of the Aldrich family's

experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer. Read on to learn more about how PTSD relates to cancer and to caregivers, and how best to proceed if you recognize symptoms in yourself.

There is a relative lack of information pertaining to PTSD and cancer. In my recently released book, I note that until 1970, the centuries-old stigma attached to cancer itself prohibited patients from even being told their diagnoses, which in turn delayed exploration of how they mentally dealt with their illness. This changed in the '70s after it became standard practice to tell patients of their cancer diagnosis, permitting the first formal study of the psychological impact of cancer.

However, a second and equally long-held stigma attached to mental illness has been yet another barrier that has kept cancer patients, their caregivers, and their families from admitting to their psychosocial problems and from seeking counseling. Late in the twentieth century, studies finally led to increased recognition that both patients and their close family members may require psychosocial assistance from medical staff and cancer support organizations. Many cancer centers are now focusing on the mental and emotional impacts of cancer. Since there is currently no cure for cancer, once it invades your life it is there—to some degree—for good.

One common sign of PTSD for caregivers is hypochondria. I'll be honest—since losing Gordon, I now realize that I have signs of PTSD. One of those is the awareness that I may be a hypochondriac. Recently, I noticed a lump at the base of my neck. Immediately, I thought “lymph nodes”! Well, the real problem turned out to be a pulled muscle, but my first thought when any unexplained symptoms manifest themselves tends to lead to cancer. Once you've seen your 43-year-old husband—who had never been sick, never had an IV, never been in the hospital, ran three miles a day, and was as big as a linebacker—succumb to cancer in two short years, you will always have a different perspective. But there are also steps you can take to allay your fears.

Schedule a yearly physical—no excuses! In my case, I always have a yearly wellness physical, complete with every kind of blood work that can be done. Just knowing that you're being checked out gives you a great deal of comfort. And there's nothing wrong with saying to your doctor, “I'm overzealous because my husband died of cancer.” When Gordon was diagnosed, I transferred to his family doctor, so we would be “on the same page.” My doctor understands and humors me.

Know what's normal for you—and what's not. Regardless of whether you've been a cancer caregiver or not, it's important to know your body. A mosquito bite might actually be a mosquito bite, but if it doesn't heal you should follow up with your dermatologist. If something on your body or in your body patterns doesn't seem right for an extended time period, get it checked out. In some ways, I think that former cancer caregivers who become “hypochondriacs” have an advantage. After all, most cancer is diagnosed too late, because people become lackadaisical and

too busy to focus on what's happening in their own bodies. Even in Gordon's case, there were signs that he ignored.

Symptoms aren't limited to hypochondria. Be aware that PTSD can manifest itself in many ways, and they aren't all as "easy" to deal with as hypochondriacal tendencies. They might include difficulty sleeping, loss of energy and interest, constant irritability, troubling dreams, emotional numbness, depression, and more. If you experience any of the more significant signs of PTSD, seek counseling. Don't try to go through it alone. Just as you need to be aware of your body, you need to be aware of your mental and emotional anxiety. If you feel that you can't cope with the feelings and concerns, it's okay to seek professional help.

The bottom line is, once someone you love has battled cancer, it will *always* be a part of your life. In many ways, your confidence in your own continued good health is shattered because you know how suddenly cancer can strike.

Whether you're currently a cancer caregiver or you have been in the past, always remember that *you* need care, too. You can't put a price on your peace of mind and quality of life!

###

About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of her books. She feels it is her destiny to relay this true story to readers in a way that will help them in their own difficult trials.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal*.

For more information, please visit www.thecancerlifeline.com or www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95) are available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.