

My name is Tamara Richardson; I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and this is a brief story of how I managed trauma in my own life.

It was a day like any other. I was working, going about my plans without any immediate concerns or issues. Suddenly, I experienced a sharp pain in my jaw. I froze, fear set in. At the end of the work day, I called my doctor requesting an appointment to address this concern as my past had trained me to not overlook any physical pain. After several exams, doctor visits, and eventually biopsies, I heard the haunting words I had heard once before from which I had successfully freed myself 4 years ago: "You have cancer... again. This time it's a more aggressive type." A few years ago, I had undergone treatment for osteosarcoma of the mandible. The treatment was very straight forward with a clear treatment plan. However, this time the treatment had to be more aggressive and it involved inpatient chemotherapy, where I spent 5 days in the hospital every week, receiving chemo every day at a hundred percent dosage, surgeries where my jaw would be removed and reconstructed, and even then, my doctors indicated that only time would tell if treatment was successful. There I was, a psychotherapist whose dedication and passion was to help others adapt, cope, manage, and improve their lives; and in turn, I was about to embark in a long and arduous journey myself.

Since this was not my first cancer rodeo, I already had a reasonable idea of the pain that was in store for me; and although I imagined what the "aggressive chemo treatment" would entail, I had no idea how it would manifest itself in my physical body. A fellow co-worker said to me: "My father went through chemo, and when you feel like you are dying, that's when you know chemo is working." The irony of chemotherapy is that it is a monitored toxic poison served to kill the cancer cells, and in this process it also kills the healthy cells. It is a slow, painful, feeling of detachment from the body, as the body becomes weaker and weaker before your own eyes. It was one of all my attempts at surviving.

What to do when giving up is not an option but surviving is not a guarantee? I wanted to live so much, that I was determined to do everything I could to fight, endure, and overcome this disease. Many people are often ready to offer encouraging words towards fighting "the fight against cancer" through medical or alternative treatments, eliminating stress, proper nutrition, staying healthy, positive, hopeful, and faithful. Not many warn you about the inner battle that takes place inside your mind and how to face that. Although one may be lucky to have an army of supporters, no one can face this battle for the patient, but the patient him/herself. As a therapist I was aware of the "mind battle;" however as a patient, I was not. It is a meticulous battle that can beat a person faster than cancer can as it is often led by fear, doubt, anger, and/or despair. This battle can go on daily when life is in turmoil. In my personal experience, its peak moments were in the beginning of the challenge as fear was present, as well as towards the end, when the body was too weak to endure any more pain, discomfort, and fatigue. Throughout the entire process I realized that although my body was increasingly weaker, my mind had the potential of a tremendous ally if I focused on nurturing it instead of becoming a slave of it. One may wonder: "how is it that I should face the 'self' when the self is what I have to rely on to get me through life?" This paradox may often lead one to feel weak, ashamed, and hopeless. These feelings then, in turn, may mask our trust in our ability to be resilient and deal with everyday life, trauma, or any challenging experience. My experience with facing my "self" was what saved my life. There were times when I had no energy left for anything, not even to satiate my thirst by simply drinking water. Lifting my arm had become a strenuous activity at that point. I asked myself, "How to keep going when there seems to be no light?" Even though I felt physically and mentally exhausted, my desire to experience something different and resort to any kind of

positive change led me to embark on a journey towards conscious self-exploration. I had to make a decision on what direction to take myself as I wanted to survive so badly. I decided then to become a partner with my “self” instead of fighting it or giving up on it. This decision opened the gate I needed to access a deeper part of soul, of my mind, and of my body. I made a commitment to myself to view the chemotherapy treatment, as well as, the pole where it was hung every day, as my warrior against cancer. “It” and I, together, would create a beautiful and harmonious team that was facing this challenge head on; without fear, but with clear intentions during every moment of the journey. I then, suddenly, felt no longer alone. Instead, I became motivated and hopeful. This wasn’t about pretending, fooling myself, or repeating positive affirmations on a daily basis as an attempt to convince myself that everything was going to change. It was much more than that. It was a deeper agreement, commitment, and belief that triggered my inner power creating additional courage, energy, and trust in myself. I see courage as the effort towards continuing to move forward as we face adversity. I no longer was attached to the outcome of the treatment of the disease; instead, I become empowered in the “present” so I could lift that glass of water, or get up from the hospital bed. This new perspective did not make the trauma or negative experiences go away in any way, but it did assist me in developing a new level of acceptance and awareness within my own experience, which unleashed a comforting sense of who I truly am based on my “being” and not on what is happening to me.

Thankfully, I was able to endure and complete my extensive chemotherapy and surgical treatments. I am still on the journey towards healing. However, on this journey, I am no longer alone as I have all parts of me working in harmony and creating a cohesive self. There is no need to run away or forget what happened or the trauma I endured anymore. This effort towards creating a harmonious self not only helped me as I battled this disease, but it continues to assist me in my perspective throughout every day, as I continue on this physical, emotional, and spiritual educational journey that life really is.