

Together Living With Cancer

a support group for people
who have been diagnosed with cancer
and for their loved ones

Leader's Manual

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Together Living With Cancer

Dear Friends:

Every congregation has people who have been diagnosed with cancer. Cancer creates a crisis for the person with cancer and for his entire family. The diagnosis is frightening. The treatment is difficult. The after shocks are long lasting. Families facing cancer often look for a place where they can find the support and understanding they need to cope with the long term effects of cancer.

It was for this reason that Together Living With Cancer was founded in 1985 by a group of cancer survivors and their families. The purpose of TLC is to provide emotional and spiritual support to families living with cancer.

If you are interested in starting such a group, this handbook was written for you. In it you will find information to guide you as a TLC leader. The manual describes such things as what your role is as a leader, how you can structure your meetings and how to deal with difficult situations. You will also find twenty five units of content to provide more than two years worth of material for your group.

It has been a moving and joyful experience to participate in TLC. Our lives have been enriched because of it. We pray that God will richly bless you as you minister to families living with cancer.

Warmly,

Juanita R. Ryan

Table of Contents

Introduction To TLC	4
1. Getting Started	6
Getting the most from this manual	6
Meeting Format	6
TLC Purpose and Group Rules	7
Leader's Notes	8
2. Living with Strong Feelings	11
Understanding Our Feelings.....	12
The Emotional Roller Coaster of Living With Cancer	16
Living With Fear.....	19
Dealing With Depression.....	22
Living With Anger	25
Grieving Our Losses	28
The Experience of Gratitude	31
Celebration and Joy.....	34
Experiencing Peace	37
Finding Hope.....	40
3. Experiencing New Challenges to Our Faith.....	43
Stretching Our Faith	44
Prayer.....	47
Examining Our View of God.....	50
Healing Prayer	53
The Lord Is With Us.....	56
Pictures of God's Healing Presence	59
4. Changing Our Perspectives	62
The Seasons of Survival	63
Living Sanely in an Insane World	66
One Day at A Time	69
Positive Thinking.....	72
Accepting Our Need for Help.....	75
Building Friendships.....	78
Perspectives About Treatment.....	81
Coping With Pain.....	84
Repairing Our Self Esteem.....	87
5. When A Group Member Dies	90
6. References and Resources	92

An Introduction to TLC

“It’s cancer.”

To many people, these words sound like a death sentence. But, as the millions of people who have cancer are discovering, these words often represent the beginning of a whole new way of life.

People now more often live with cancer than die with cancer. People who have had a diagnosis of cancer embark on the journey of becoming cancer survivors. Once a diagnosis of cancer is made, the possibility of a recurrence is always present. Even years after being free of cancer, people who have had cancer live with the possibility of facing cancer again every time they experience a new pain and every time they go to a physician for a check up. Learning to live with a potentially life threatening disease is a significant physical, emotional, social and spiritual challenge.

In some very fundamental ways, everything changes after a diagnosis of cancer has been made. These changes are equally significant for the person with cancer and for his or her family. Perhaps the most significant change is that we are reminded of our mortality. We look death in the face. And, as a result, we see in a new and highly dramatic way that life is fragile, that we are mortal and that every day of life is a gift from God.

This fundamental shift in perspective brings several changes. We experience intense feelings of fear and grief. We re-examine our values and re-order our priorities. And we embark on an important spiritual journey.

The family facing cancer is challenged and traumatized physically by surgery and treatment, emotionally by fear and grief, socially by friends who withdraw, and spiritually by doubts and questions. In the midst of all this trauma family members look to each other for the understanding and support they need. But because the struggle is so intense, families often find that they cannot adequately support each other. They need some other resource to provide the support, comfort and encouragement that will help them live with the challenges that cancer brings.

The purpose of Together Living With Cancer is to provide such support to families living with cancer. TLC provides a place to talk about the many changes and challenges which cancer brings.

TLC is not a therapy group or a place to be educated by experts in the field of cancer. TLC is a support group. The premise of a support group is that people with a common struggle in life come together to talk about their needs and feelings in relation to that common struggle. In this case, the common struggle is the challenge of living with cancer. In the process of meeting together, people find that they are not alone. They discover hope. They find love. As a result, the quality of life, and perhaps even the quantity of life, is increased.

TLC is helpful to people no matter where they are on their journey with cancer. TLC can be helpful when a person is first diagnosed with cancer, is undergoing treatment, has had a recurrence, or has been free of cancer for weeks or months or years. We have had group members who have been free of cancer for more than ten years and others who have just received a diagnosis.

TLC is a place where we laugh wholeheartedly and cry freely. It is a place where there is freedom to rejoice together and to weep together. We talk about what it feels like to be getting chemotherapy and radiation treatments. We talk about our changing values and perspectives. We talk about our spiritual struggles. And we talk about the specific realities that we individually face in the coming days and weeks so that we can pray for each other.

As we talk, we realize that here are people who understand. They understand fatigue and fear of doctor appointments. They understand numb fingers and pains that cause us worry. They understand sleepless nights. They understand the emotional roller coaster of living with cancer. They understand our questions about God and our urgent need of God. And they understand how precious life has become.

We have discovered that an amazing process of caring and connecting takes place as a result of our coming together and sharing with each other. People pray for each other. People call each other during the week. Others write notes.

Some develop special friendships.

Our group is a warm place. Visitors are greeted by several people. We hug each other when we come and when we go. We value and respect expressions of emotion. We are honest about our struggles with faith. We do not give advice or try to fix people. We simply offer our love and support and prayers.

May you find life with cancer to be more hopeful as you minister and are ministered to through TLC.

Section 1

Getting Started

It does not take an expert or a professional to lead a TLC group. It does take two people who have had direct experience with cancer either as patients or as support people, who are willing to commit to develop this ministry in their church and community. This section provides the basic information you will need to lead a group.

TLC Meeting Format

Many support groups meet weekly but we found that meeting twice a month is preferable because of the fatigue that people living with cancer often face. We meet from 7:00PM until 8:30PM. We try to be very careful about ending on time, again because of fatigue problems for many group participants. People often stay and talk after the group, but ending on time allows those who need to leave the opportunity to do so.

We begin our group meeting with an informal time of socializing, getting coffee and tea and greeting each other. By 7:10 or 7:15 we find our way to the seats, which are arranged in a circle. We use the following meeting format:

- Welcome
- Reading of statement of purpose, group rules and verse (see below)
- Opening prayer
- Introductions
- Reading aloud the topic for the month
- Sharing based on the provided questions
- Sharing personal updates and prayer requests
- Prayer

One of the group leaders welcomes the group and acknowledges any one who is new or who has returned after an absence. The leader then reads the statement of purpose and the group rules and opens in prayer. We then go around the circle, introducing ourselves by name and stating if we have cancer or if we are present as a support person.

We then turn our attention to the topic for the evening. The topics we use for the group are in three categories:

- Living with Strong Feelings
- Challenges to Faith
- Changing Perspectives

In total there are twenty five topics. Since each topic includes questions or activities for two sessions, this represents more than two years worth of material for a group which only uses one 'topic' per month.

You can work your way straight through the topics as presented here, or you can jump around between the various topics. Because cancer brings such a variety of challenges, it might be the most helpful to jump around, depending on what your group seems to need at the time.

We focus on only one topic each month. We discuss it at both of the monthly meetings. One of the leaders, or a volunteer, reads the material on a topic and then asks the discussion questions. We allow the discussion to continue until about 7:45 pm. We then ask people to update us on what is going on in their lives so that we can pray for each other.

At about 8:20 or 8:25 we hold hands around the circle and spend time praying for each other. Sometimes this is an open prayer time when anyone can pray, sometimes one of the leaders will close in prayer. Some nights we break the group up at 8:00PM into two groups (people with cancer and support people) for separate times of sharing and prayer.

TLC Statement of Purpose

TLC is a group of people who have had a diagnosis of cancer or who have a family member or friend who has had a diagnosis of cancer. We share together the often difficult process of coping with the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. Our basic purpose is to support each other spiritually and emotionally so that we can live each day to its fullest.

TLC is not a medical clinic, a hospice program, or a group of experts who offer advice on the treatment of cancer. We are a group of people who are eager to listen, to share our own struggles and joys and to pray for each other.

TLC Group Rules

TLC follows a few basic group rules:

Anything shared within the group is considered confidential and we agree not to share anything outside of the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

We will provide time for each person to share if they feel comfortable doing so.

We will talk about ourselves and our own situations and experiences, avoiding conversation about other people or about abstract ideas.

We will listen attentively to each other and will be very cautious about giving advice.

We will pray for each other.

TLC Theme Verse

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,
who comforts us in all our troubles,
so that we can comfort those in any trouble
with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.
II Corinthians 1:3,4

Notes to Group Leaders

A diagnosis of cancer creates a crisis for the person with cancer and for their entire family. The diagnosis is frightening. The treatment is often difficult. The after shocks can be long lasting. Families facing cancer often look for a place where they can find the support they need to cope with both the immediate and the long term effects of cancer.

It was for this reason that Together Living With Cancer was founded. The purpose of TLC is to provide emotional and spiritual support to families living with cancer.

It does not take an expert or a professional to lead a TLC group. It does require two people who have had direct experience with cancer—either as patients or as support people—who are willing to commit to develop this ministry in their church or community.

Just a few bits of advice about leading a TLC group:

Do Not Lead Alone

The first thing we would say to you as a leader of a TLC group is that you need a co-leader. Jesus sent his disciples out in twos. It is an important principle. We do not feel it is wise to try to lead any support group alone. If you cannot find a co-leader, perhaps you need to wait to start the group until you do find one. You need emotional and spiritual support to lead the group. You need to debrief the meetings with someone. You need someone to plan with. You need someone for the hard times when someone in the group dies. And there will be times when you need to be able to take vacation trips or stay home to celebrate a family member's birthday. A co-leader makes all of this possible.

Starting A Group

When two or more people in your church or community have agreed to co-lead a TLC group, the first thing you will need to do is to find a place to meet. You may want to go to your minister to explain what you want to do and to ask for a place to meet. If you are unable to meet at the church, or for some reason you do not want to, you might approach your community library or YMCA for a room.

To get the word out about what you are doing, you might meet with your own minister and with other ministers in your community. Most ministers are aware of many people in their congregations who have cancer who would welcome such a group. TLC provides a wonderful referral resource for ministers.

You might also meet with the social workers or chaplains in your local hospitals. And you might send information to physicians in your area. We developed a brochure to leave with these contacts, so these professional care givers could let people know about the group.

Even though TLC is a Christian support group for families, everyone is welcome, regardless of where they are on their journey of faith. TLC is not a place where people are preached at. It is a place where people experience being loved and prayed for in the name of Christ.

Expect to start small. Success is not measured in numbers in this kind of ministry, but in the meeting of very real needs.

Know Your Limits

Being a group leader does not mean that you and your co-leader have to do it all. The group members will come with their own gifts and abilities. If you feel like you have to make endless phone calls or write lots of notes or be the primary prayer support for the group, the abilities of the other group members to minister will not have an opportunity to emerge. Realize your limitations. Live within those limits. Allow the group to begin to minister to each other.

Understand Your Role

A support group needs a facilitator. That is your role. You do not need to be an expert to facilitate a TLC group. You are not in the role of a therapist or counselor. You go to TLC as a group member. Do not take on the role of expert because this will kill the group. If people look to you for advice, share only from your own experience and refer people back to professionals for professional advice. Let people say what they are willing and able to say. Thank people for sharing. Share your own struggle and journey as honestly as you can.

When a Group Member Dies

The most difficult reality we face as a group is the death of a group member. We do not face this difficult experience very often, but we do face it. Because it is such an important issue, we have included a separate section to help you respond to these occasions when they arise.

Leading A Discussion

You may feel apprehensive about leading a group discussion. This is a common feeling. You do not know if people will talk or if you will know how to respond. It is helpful to remember that your role is to provide a simple structure that allows for discussion. It is the group's job to do the talking. You only need to give them the opportunity to do so.

After you read the introductory material to a topic, you can read the discussion questions for the week, one at a time. After you read each question, allow for a time of silence. Consciously relax during this time of silence and wait patiently. People need time to think and reflect after a question has been asked. And they need time to decide if they want to talk. If you are relaxed during this time and able to wait, people will feel comfortable taking time to think and people will take the responsibility to respond as they are ready.

As a rule, it is best to wait until several group members talk before you share anything yourself. This helps the group see that it is their job to discuss the question. But occasionally you can lead the way by talking first. After each person talks, allow for another time of silence. Then ask, “Does someone else have some thoughts about this subject?” until several people have had an opportunity to talk.

An alternative to simply reading the questions is to distribute the questions as a handout and to have everyone spend three to five minutes writing responses to the questions on their own before you discuss them. We have found this to be especially helpful when we are focusing on difficult emotions, such as anger and depression, or on other issues that people tend to not want to talk about. Having people write before discussing gives everyone an opportunity to think about their responses to a topic. More people share when we use this approach. And people share more honestly. People may not want to write every time they come to the group, however, so varying your approach is probably a good idea.

Listening To Emotional Pain

TLC is a group where emotions are valued and respected. We keep a box of kleenex and pass it around as needed, because we often have good reason for tears. But we also have reason to laugh, often at ourselves. People report that they often come to the group with little energy, feeling discouraged, not really wanting to be there. And they consistently report that they leave feeling energized, more hopeful and glad they came. The fact that we cry together does not mean that we have a “downer” group. It actually provides a healing release for people and makes genuine laughter possible.

As a leader, listening to emotional pain can be very difficult. This is especially true if you are not sure how to respond. When someone tells us that they are sad or anxious or angry, it is not uncommon to think that they need or want us to somehow take their pain away. We may, therefore, think we need to say something that will make the person feel better.

What we need to realize, however, is that people have very little opportunity to actually feel their emotional pain. They often feel called upon by their families or friends to “be strong.” For emotional and spiritual support to be experienced, people need the freedom to express whatever they feel. For release and healing to take place they need to express what they feel in an environment of acceptance and respect.

Our goal is not to take people’s pain away or to make them feel better, but to give them a safe place to express as much as they are able to express of the powerful feelings that are part of their struggle. Our goal is to listen and to thank them for sharing. As it is appropriate, group members (and leaders) may respond by sharing their own emotional struggles with the same issue. It is, however, okay to have nothing to say—except “thank you for sharing that with us.”

If the group seems uncomfortable with the expression of emotions, it might be helpful to acknowledge that you sense this discomfort and that it is not always easy to allow people to feel what they feel. Reviewing with the group the above material may prove helpful to set a tone of acceptance and growing comfort with feelings.

Section 2

Living with Strong Feelings

Cancer threatens everything. Our health, our work, our independence, our future, our energy, our life. The threats that come with cancer and its treatment evoke powerful feelings in us that we may not be used to experiencing. We find ourselves on an emotional roller coaster experiencing everything from grief, anger, fear and depression, to hope, gratitude and joy. Talking about these many feelings can help us live with them constructively. The following pages are designed to facilitate group discussions about some of the feelings cancer brings.

Understanding Our Feelings

Feelings are part of our basic equipment for knowing and experiencing ourselves, each other, our world, and God. They give us information about what we need and want. They allow us to know what is in our hearts and on our minds. They open up the possibility of emotional intimacy.

In spite of this, we often live as if our feelings are unacceptable. The feelings which are considered unacceptable are often the feelings most commonly experienced in response to a diagnosis of cancer. Some people believe they need to be cheerful and optimistic even in the face of a crisis. Unpleasant feelings such as sadness and anger and fear are rejected, in spite of how normal these feelings are as a response to the enormous threat that cancer presents.

Scripture provides many examples of God's faithful people experiencing anger, depression and fear. Jesus himself expressed a wide variety of emotions—including many which we find it difficult to tolerate in ourselves. Jesus angrily drove the money changers out of the temple, he grieved over Jerusalem, he wept at Lazarus' grave, he groaned in Gethsemane. The experiences of anger, sorrow and agonizing struggle are part of the rich experience of being the people God created us to be.

When we label some feelings as "good" and some as "bad" we usually try very hard to not feel the "bad" emotions. This leads only to falsehood and pretense. It causes us to hide our feelings from ourselves and from others. When we try to "keep the lid on" our feelings they do not go away. Keeping the lid on only redirects them into physical tension, mental distress, or spiritual discouragement. Deception about our feelings will result in bondage. Truth, however, can free us.

Cancer evokes intense, unpleasant feelings. When we are unaccustomed to living with unpleasant feelings, we may become confused or alarmed by these feelings. What can be helpful to us during times when emotions are intense is to write about them, to talk about them with God and to talk about them with trusted friends.

We can learn to respect our feelings and value them as one of God's gifts to us.

Creator, God,
You gave us a wonderful gift when you gave us the capacity to feel.
You gave us the ability to laugh,
to celebrate and to love.
You also gave us the ability
to be angry at injustice,
to fear danger
and to grieve our losses.

Give us the wisdom we need to respect our feelings
as they come and go.
Give us the honesty we need to live with our feelings.
Help us to talk to you and others about them.
Give us compassion to care for each other
when feelings are intense.
We ask this in the name of Jesus
who wept when it was time for weeping.
Amen.

Understanding Our Feelings

Handout for Discussion - Week 1

Feelings

are an important part of our basic equipment for knowing and experiencing the world.
enrich our lives as a source of pleasure and displeasure
tell us about ourselves, about our expectations, perceptions and needs.

When we ignore or suppress our feelings we

spend energy to do so.
may experience a “pressure cooker effect.”
miss out on the enriching experience those emotions bring us.
miss out on the information emotions can give us about ourselves.
redirect the emotions into physical tension and spiritual or mental distress.
give the emotions control over our behavior that we may not be aware of.

When we accept and experience our feelings

our self awareness is increased.
our experience of life is richer.
we are able to live more honestly.
problems can be identified and resolved.
the physical, mental and spiritual tension is relieved or avoided.

Feelings need to be

identified.
respected.
experienced.
verbalized.
put into perspective.

Understanding Our Feelings

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. How were feelings expressed in your family when you were growing up?
2. Think of a time you were angry or sad as a child. What was your family's response to your feelings?
3. What strong emotions have you been especially aware of since your journey with cancer first started?
4. What helps you to live with these strong feelings?

Understanding Our Feelings

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. How have you responded to the strong emotions that cancer has brought into your life?

2. When you are sad or angry or afraid what do you most need from a friend?

3. How might it be helpful to you to talk to God about your strong emotions?

The Emotional Roller Coaster of Cancer

How long, O Lord?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?

But I trust in your unfailing love:
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me.

Psalm 13:1-2 & 5-6

A diagnosis of cancer is a life changing event for most people. One of the many changes that this diagnosis brings is a new experience with emotions. Emotions we may never have been aware of before begin to emerge. Other more familiar emotions may be felt with such intensity that we find them hard to recognize. The variety of these intense and strange emotions can make us feel like we are on an emotional roller coaster.

We may experience fear, anxiety and even panic. Yet there are moments of unexplainable peace. We may be sad and depressed. Yet we may be grateful for each day of life and as a result, we may experience a surprising joy. We may be angry and even enraged. Yet we may also feel a deep renewal of love for those closest to us. We may feel completely alone, yet deeply moved by the people who reach out to us. We may feel helpless and hopeless, while at the same time the concept of hope takes on a richer meaning. We may commit ourselves to fight with all our strength against this foe, finding strength we never knew we had. Yet we may also experience a tiredness we never thought possible.

These emotions come and go. They are unpredictable. They are often beyond our control. The ups and downs and the intensity of the emotions may at times make us feel like we are going crazy. But we are not. These emotions are all a normal part of responding to an abnormal situation.

Our emotions are a gift from God. They contain important information about us. It is information that we need. Our emotions can inform us about problems and blessings. Our emotions can enrich our lives. Our emotions can provide the basis for building deep and meaningful relationships.

We need to allow ourselves to experience our emotions in all their variety, and to share them with each other. Together we need to laugh and to cry, to celebrate and to grieve.

Rejoice with those who rejoice;
Mourn with those who mourn.
Romans 12:15

The Emotional Roller Coaster of Living With Cancer

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. What makes it difficult to talk about your changing feelings?
2. What helps you take the risk to talk about your feelings?
3. Of the many feelings you have experienced in response to cancer, which have been the most difficult for you to live with?
4. What helps you to live with your changing feelings?

Living With Fear

Do not fear,
for I am with you;
Do not be dismayed,
for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you
with my righteous right hand.
Isaiah 41:10

Scripture tells us clearly, “Do not fear.” For many years I read such verses as commands—commands I could not seem to obey. As a result, I wondered if something was wrong with my faith when I experienced fear.

Fear is a very uncomfortable emotion that we would all be happy to be rid of. We wish we could simply stop feeling afraid. But it is not so simple.

Fear is a normal and important response to danger. It is an emotion which allows us to protect ourselves when we are threatened. If we did not experience fear, we would not get out of the way of an oncoming car and we would not go to the doctor when we experience pain.

The fears we experience with cancer include fears about our immediate well being, fears about the future and fears about the many uncertainties that we face because of the way cancer seems to threaten everything in our lives. Sometimes the fear we experience may be so intense that it feels like a black cloud engulfing us.

Scriptures which tell us not to fear are not telling us to quickly get rid of this normal human emotion. The words “do not fear” are, rather, spoken as words of comfort. These words are always followed by a specific promise of God’s presence with us. Much like a parent comforts a child who awakens from a nightmare with words such as, “It’s okay, I’m here with you; you are safe,” God says to us, “I know you are afraid, but I am here with you; I will not leave you; you are safe in my arms.”

The more we are able to take in the full extent of God’s love for us, the more we are able to hear these words ‘do not fear’ and experience God’s presence and comfort.

He tends his flock like a shepherd;
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.
Isaiah 40:11

Living With Fear

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

For this discussion, read Matthew 6:25-34 aloud before reading the questions.

1. What makes it difficult to trust God in the struggle with cancer?

2. List the reasons Jesus gives in this text for trusting God.

3. Which of these reasons for trusting God do you especially need to hear?

Dealing With Depression

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
Psalm 130:1-2

All of us who have faced cancer know what it is to be in the 'depths.' We know what it is to struggle with depression.

Depression is an experience of sorrow in response to a loss which threatens our self-esteem or future hope. The actual and potential losses that come with cancer are many, both for the person with cancer and for all who know and love someone who has cancer.

This sorrow is an important part of our adapting to the reality of cancer. It is a natural consequence of our commitment to face this difficult reality and to be honest about all it means in our life. Fortunately, this sorrow does not stay with us forever. It comes and goes as we ride the emotional roller coaster of living with cancer. But when depression does visit us, it can be a very unwelcome guest.

Depression is like living in the depths of a dark well. When we are in this well, there seems to be no way out. Everything seems dark. We have negative thoughts about ourselves, about our future, about others and even about God.

It is not uncommon when we are depressed to wonder if God is displeased with us. We may wonder if God will withdraw from us until we can "get our act together" and "cheer up." But God does not withdraw from us in our darkest moments. It is, instead, in those moments that God moves even closer to us with compassionate and mercy. The psalmist tells us:

The Lord is close to the broken hearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18

Jesus was known as "the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." We can trust him to understand and to honor his promise to be close to us when we are sorrowing.

Dealing with depression can be made a bit easier by doing things like taking a walk, listening to good music, talking to a friend, and reading the promises of Scripture. In times of depression, we need hope. Jesus is not only the man of sorrows, he is also the source of our hope. He has committed himself to us as Healer, Comforter and Friend.

May you find God to be close to you when you are broken hearted. May your hope in God's unfailing love for you be renewed with each new day.

Dealing With Depression

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. In your journey with cancer, what times have been the most discouraging for you?

2. What about being depressed is the most difficult for you?

3. What has helped you when you have been depressed?

Dealing With Depression

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. We often have negative responses to our ourselves when we are depressed. What negative thoughts do you have about yourself when you are depressed?

2. Paraphrase Psalm 34:18, using your own words.

3. How might it be helpful to you to think of God as close to you when you are depressed?

LIVING WITH ANGER

No more lying, then!
Everyone must tell the truth to his fellow believer,
because we are all members together in the body of Christ.
If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin
and do not stay angry all day. . .
No more shouting or insults,
no more hateful feelings of any sort.
Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another,
and forgive one another,
as God has forgiven you through Christ.
Eph. 4:25-32 (Good News Bible)

Anger is an emotion that is common in everyday life. It is an emotion that energizes and alerts us to the fact that we have been hurt or threatened in some way. It is often experienced with great intensity in the times of emotional pain that come with a diagnosis of cancer.

For most of us, anger is uncomfortable and even frightening. We often do not know how to respond when we experience it in ourselves or when we see it in others.

Scripture treats anger as an ordinary part of life. It does not teach that we should never be angry. Rather, Scripture presumes that we will experience anger and proceeds to teach us how to be angry. This passage from Ephesians teaches 1) that we should be honest about our anger, 2) that we should not hang on to our anger, and 3) that we should not lash out at others in our anger.

We typically have two problems with anger. The first problem we may have is that we may pretend not to be angry, when we really are angry. The second problem we may have is that we may say or do things that are hurtful to others when we are angry.

Pretending not to be angry is actually a way of hanging on to our anger. When we are not honest about our anger, it will find a home deep within us as bitterness or depression, undermining our relationships and our spiritual and emotional well-being.

Being hurtful or explosive when angry also poses a significant threat to our relationships and to our sense of well-being. Explosive anger can create a cycle of anger and hurt that damages our most important relationships, leaving us alienated and alone.

Anger does not need to be destructive. Anger, like other emotions, is one of God's gifts to us. It can be a constructive force in our lives. Anger alerts us to the fact that something is not right. It can protect us and motivate us if we use it appropriately. It can help us identify unmet needs. It can keep us honest in our relationships.

Living With Anger

Handout and Questions for Discussion - Week 1

“If you become angry,
do not let your anger
lead you into sin.”
Ephesians 4:26

Be Angry:

Identify anger in yourself

Look for the source of the anger.

Own your anger. No one “makes” us angry, we respond with anger.

Share your anger. Be direct. “I am angry.” “When I see/hear _____, I think _____, and I feel angry.”

Ask for what you need, without making demands..

Be open to changes in self.

Be open to forgive and let go.

But do not sin:

Do not pretend to be above getting angry.

Don't pretend there is no problem.

Don't blame your anger on someone else.

Do not be indirect, apologize prematurely, attempt to control, or talk about the person rather than to them.

Do not assume the other person has to change.

Do not assume you are 100% right.

Do not hold on to your anger.

Discussion Questions:

1. When you are angry are you more likely to pretend not to be angry or to say hurtful things to people?

2. Being angry can be frightening. What risks do you perceive when you are angry?

3. What advantages have you found in being honest about your anger?

Living With Anger

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. How was anger expressed in your family as you grew up?

2. What about the experience of cancer has caused you to feel anger?

3. How has your anger helped you to learn to live with cancer?

Grieving Our Losses

Rejoice with those who rejoice;
and grieve with those who grieve.
Romans 12:15

Cancer brings with it many subtle and unexpected losses. Some of the losses include the loss of an innocent and care-free perspective about life; the loss of a healthy, intact body; the loss of energy; the loss of a sense of control over life; the loss of friends who could not face the cancer with us; and the loss of a sense of a certain future.

Losses need to be grieved. To grieve is to embrace the reality of change. To grieve is to open our hearts to let go of what we cannot hold onto in order to receive gifts of comfort and grace.

We need to face the reality of our losses with the support of others. We need to talk about our losses and acknowledge our feelings about our losses. We need to do this because it allows us to integrate the reality of our losses into our understandings of ourselves, of life and of God. And it allows us then to move past the pain, to new freedom and peace.

Grief is a process. It is something that unfolds slowly over time. It cannot be hurried. Bit by bit we face our losses and let go and move on. One step at a time. One day at a time.

Grief takes emotional, physical and spiritual energy. It is painful to face the reality of our losses. Because of this, we may want to avoid grief. We may want to tell ourselves that it is not so bad, or to cheer up. But if we avoid grief, we avoid facing reality. And this can be far more problematic than we realize. It is important for our physical, emotional and spiritual health that we do the important and sacred work of grieving.

“Blessed are they that mourn,” Jesus said, “for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4) Jesus promised that when we do the hard work of grieving we will be comforted.

O Father,
Our refuge and our strength,
Our help in times of trouble,
Were it not for your faithfulness,
we would hide ourselves from pain.
We would choose not to see our losses.
We would not be able to face
what has really happened.
Man of sorrows,
teach us to grieve.
Give us the courage to mourn
so that one day we will be able
to dance with joy.
We ask this in the name of Jesus,
who was acquainted with grief.
Amen.

Grieving our Losses

Handout for Discussion - Week 1

Fill in the following columns, identifying the losses you have experienced, the threats those losses present in your life, your thoughts and feelings about the losses, and the perspectives you may have gained as a result of your losses. Spend time discussing this as a group.

Loss	Threat the Loss Presents	Thoughts and Feelings About the Loss	Perspectives Gained

The Experience of Gratitude

Praise the Lord, O my soul;
all my inmost being,
praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you
with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
Psalm 103:1-6

When cancer enters our lives with all its threats of harm, we are likely to struggle with fear, anger and depression. These are normal and probably unavoidable emotional responses to the dangers we perceive from a diagnosis of cancer.

But once in awhile, on the emotional roller coaster with cancer, the sun breaks through the clouds and we see life and relationships in entirely new ways. We understand with profound clarity that life is a gift. And we experience gratitude.

Gratitude is the capacity to acknowledge and receive the gifts that are offered to us every day. Gratitude allows us to see that what we have in life has come to us by God's grace.

The practice of opening ourselves to gratitude involves a few basic steps. We might begin by asking God's help to notice the gifts that are being offered to us in the present moment. As we begin to notice the gifts, both big and small, we can allow ourselves to acknowledge them and to express our gratitude. All of this can be done in the quiet of our hearts and minds, or it can be something we write about or share with others.

The experience of gratitude is not something we need to force. It is not an attempt to avoid painful realities. It is an awareness of the many gifts of sustaining grace we are being given in the midst of our struggles.

Gratitude tends to emerge more freely in the moments of life when we are able to stop our frantic efforts to prove ourselves or to earn our way through life. It happens when we realize that the essence of life is not performing, or proving ourselves, or hanging on to what we have, but that the essence of life is in being who we are and knowing that all we are and have is a gift to be shared.

Moments of gratitude, in the midst of fear, anger and depression are moments of deep refreshment. These are moments when we are surprised by joy.

Experiencing Gratitude

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. Sometimes we try to force gratitude. The people around us may seem to encourage us to do so. And we may do this on our own to avoid the down side of the emotional roller coaster of living with cancer. What experiences have you had with feeling a need to force a sense of gratitude?

2. What moments of genuine gratitude have you experienced?

3. What are you especially grateful for today?

Experiencing Gratitude

Exercise for Discussion - Week 2

Many of the Psalms are expressions of deep, genuine gratitude to God for the gifts of life.

Write a psalm or prayer of your own to express your gratitude to God.

(Allow people who desire to do so to read these prayers aloud to the group.)

Celebration and Joy

O Lord, you turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent,
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.
Psalm 30:11,12

When we have struggled with cancer and faced the possibility of our own death we may be surprised to realize that we have been given a new ability to celebrate each new day of life as a gift from God. In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster talks about the importance of celebration:

“Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. He entered the world on a high note of jubilation: ‘I bring you good news of a great joy,’ cried the angel, ‘which shall come to all the people’ (Lk 2:10). He left the world bequeathing His joy to the disciples: ‘These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full’ (John 15:11).

In the Old Testament all of the social stipulations of the year of Jubilee – canceling all debts, releasing slaves, no planting of crops, returning property to the original owner – were a celebration of the gracious provision of God. People celebrated because God could be trusted to provide what was needed.

Our encounter with cancer can leave us with fear about our future and can erode our sense of hope. Celebration allows us to focus on the good gifts God has given us today, and helps us to look to God to care for us in the future.

Celebrations can be woven into our daily lives in many ways. We might begin each day with a simple prayer, thanking God for the gift of life this day. We might sing or dance to our favorite music. We might walk outside and stretch our arms out to the sky. We might clasp hands around the table and offer words of gratitude to God for our life together. We might make our favorite meal and invite a friend to share it with us. We might light a candle every time we have a milestone to mark, whether it is one more treatment done, one more week of life, one more month or year of being cancer free.

To become a person who can celebrate while living with cancer is not a simple task. But it is possible. May a sense of God’s presence allow you to enter into simple acts of celebration!

Celebration and Joy

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What are some of your favorite memories of celebrating as a child, or as an adult?

2. What about the experience of living with cancer makes celebration difficult?

3. How has your experience with cancer changed your ability to celebrate life?

Celebration and Joy

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. How can simple celebrations of life be helpful to us as we live with cancer?

2. What are some of the things you do to celebrate the good things in your life?

3. Activity: Bring a cake and give each person a candle to place in their piece. Let each person state what they would like to celebrate, whether it is the number of weeks or years they have been cancer-free, or the number of treatments they have behind them, or the good report from the doctor, or the gift of life today.

Experiencing Peace

Do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving,
present your requests to God.
And the peace of God,
which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds
in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:20

Cancer produces fear and anxiety. Any sense of peace that we may have once had in life seems shattered. Life is suddenly full of cares and worries.

The person with cancer may wonder, “How sick will the treatments make me? Will I be here next Christmas? Will I see the children graduate or marry? How will my family cope with my illness? How will we pay all the bills? When can I go back to being productive?”

Family members may wonder, “How will I do all the extra work of taking this person to treatment and doing the things he or she cannot do now? Will life ever be good for us again? Will he or she be here next Christmas? Will I be able to cope with all the feelings I have?”

These are not small worries. These are significant concerns in response to real threats. Is it possible in the face of such concerns to ever know real peace again?

What is peace? Is it the absence of problems? Is it the absence of unpleasant emotions? If that were the case, then no one would ever experience peace, because life is full of problems and we experience all kinds of emotions every day with or without cancer.

Peace is not the absence of problems or the absence of strong emotions. Peace is a deep, internal calm in the midst of a storm. It is a calm that comes from an awareness that God has not forgotten or forsaken us, that God holds us securely in loving hands.

Peace is the experience a child has when a parent hold her during a thunderstorm. It is the security that comes from knowing that we are loved.

Peace is knowing that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

When peace seems to desert us and the anxieties of living with cancer take over, we are invited to bring our requests to God. We are invited to bring all our worries to God so that God can give us peace. A peace that is beyond our understanding. A peace that will guard our hearts and minds.

When we bring our worries and concerns to God it might be helpful to use a biblical image of God as we pray. We can picture God as a Shepherd joyfully bending down and picking us up to carry us in his arms. We can picture God as the Everlasting King and Creator who opens his hands to provide good things for all he has made. Or we can picture God in Jesus, welcoming us as little children, gently putting his arm around us to draw us to himself.

When I said, “My foot is slipping,
your love, O Lord, supported me,
your consolation brought joy to my soul.
Psalm 95: 18-19

Experiencing Peace

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What worries disturb your peace?

2. What do you do when your are worried that is not helpful?

3. What do you do that is helpful?

4. What past experiences have helped you to grow more confident of God's love for you?

Finding Hope

For I know the plans I have for you,
declares the Lord,
plans to prosper you
and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.
Jeremiah 29:11

Hope. We cannot go on living without it. Without hope we sink into a dark pit of despair from which there seems to be no way out. And we give up.

Cancer sometimes threatens our hope. It is not uncommon in our journey with cancer to fall into despair. We wonder if things will ever get better for us. We may begin to fear that they will get worse.

Hope is a gift from God. It is the ability to trust that God does have good things in mind for us, even though we cannot always see what they are.

Sometimes medical personnel say things that threaten our hope for life and health. The doctor may tell us that our prognosis is poor, or that there is nothing they can do about the pain we have. We need to listen carefully to our doctors. But we also need to remember that they are not God. They do not have the final word about the outcome of our cancer.

It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between denial and hope. But there is a difference. Denial is an inability to take in the reality of the events in our lives. It is an unavoidable response to threatening realities. Denial protects us from acute emotional pain that would otherwise overwhelm us. Denial keeps us from full awareness of the truth until we are ready to face that truth. As we are able, we move out of denial and see reality more clearly and feel our emotions more fully.

Hope is not moving back into denial. Nor is it fleeing into a fantasy world where everything turns out fine or where there are no problems.

Hope is knowing that God is with us in all of life's circumstances. It is hanging onto God's hand while facing reality. It is remembering that God's plans for us are good, even when our circumstances are difficult.

Hope is an orientation toward the future, a future that is in the hands of a loving God.

May the God of hope fill you
with all joy and peace
as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13

Finding Hope

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What things threaten your hope?

2. When have you felt especially hopeless?

3. What restores your hope?

Finding Hope

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. How would you define hope?

2. What are you looking forward to in the near and in the distant future?

3. What do you know about God that gives you reason to hope?

Section 3

Experiencing New Challenges to Our Faith

A diagnosis of cancer can leave a person and his family shaken spiritually. The world as we once understood it may no longer exist. Old explanations no longer seem to fit or to make sense. It seems as if everything is up for grabs. Cancer presents new challenges to our faith. We find ourselves asking frightening questions about God. We find ourselves unable to pray. We find ourselves seeking healing. We need to know that we are not alone with these experiences. We need to discover that it good to ask hard questions, that we can ask others to pray when we cannot and that we have been invited by God to ask for healing and help in times of need.

Stretching Our Faith

A diagnosis of cancer creates a crisis for the person with the diagnosis and for his entire family. A time of crisis is a time of need. Emotionally it is time of instability and anxiety. Physically it is a time of tension and exhaustion. Psychologically it is a time of personal reevaluation. And spiritually it can be a time of profound questioning.

One of the ways to understand the spiritual needs of a person in crisis is to examine the questions that are commonly raised in a crisis. A person in crisis does not wrestle with mere ideas, but with God. "God, who are you?" "God, do you love me?" "God, can I trust you?" "God, is my faith strong enough to see me through this?" This is the heart of the spiritual struggling that people experience as they live with cancer. It is the trust and love in one's relationship with God that is at stake in these struggles.

A common spiritual question asked in a crisis is "Why?" This question may lead to a questioning of God's existence and character or to a questioning of one's own spiritual well-being. Both kinds of questioning can be extremely frightening. These questions represent significant spiritual struggles and they can create a spiritual crisis which compounds the original physical crisis of cancer.

What we need in times of profound spiritual struggle are friends who will not be shocked by our questions and who will not attempt to supply the "correct" answers to these questions. People in crisis need friends who are prepared to struggle with them; who will not hurry past the questions and the spiritual struggles that crises may bring. Spiritual growth comes when we are able to do the hard work of facing these questions and of searching for new understanding with the support of others.

Dearest Father:

We long to trust you,

We long to anticipate your goodness,

But, when a crisis comes, we find ourselves wondering about you.

Are you really loving?

Do you really care about us?

And we find ourselves wondering
about ourselves.

Have we abandoned you?

Has our faith failed this test?

Speak to us, God, in the midst of our sorrow and pain and confusion.

Speak so we can hear you.

Touch us so we can feel you.

Heal the wound that threatens our intimacy.

Amen.

Stretching Our Faith

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What questions have you found yourself asking about God during your journey with cancer?

2. What questions have you asked about yourself and your faith?

3. What has not been helpful to you as you have struggled with these questions?

4. What has been helpful to you as you have struggled with these questions?

Stretching Our Faith

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
Psalm 69: 1-3

O God, you are my God;
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.
Psalm 63:1

- 1.. When have you felt worn out from calling for help?
2. The psalmist longs for God. How have you experienced this?
3. In what ways has God seemed far away during your experience with cancer?
4. In what ways has God seemed close during this time?

Prayer

“Jesus the Son of God is our great High Priest who has gone to heaven itself to help us; therefore let us never stop trusting Him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, since He had the same temptations we do, though He never once gave way to them and sinned. So let us come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need. Hebrews 4:14-16 (Living Bible)

Prayer can become routine. But when our health and life are threatened by cancer, we learn to value prayer in a new way.

Our prayers, at times, may become more urgent and more passionate. We understand our desperate need and our powerlessness. We are thrown on God’s mercy with new intensity.

At other times we may find ourselves unable to pray. This can be a disorienting and discouraging experience. It might be helpful to know that not being able to pray is a common experience for people in crisis. When we cannot pray because we are too ill or too weak or too depressed, we can ask others to pray for us. And in those times we can remember that Jesus prays for us.

Prayer is acknowledging our dependence on our Maker. It is asking for God’s help and care. In the process of asking for help in prayer something happens to us. Our attention becomes focused on God.

As we focus our attention on God we are changed. Prayer, which begins as a response to God’s invitation, often leads us to an experience of God which changes us. Prayer is then a place of transformation. Here is how Henri Nouwen describes the process:

“The pains and struggles we encounter in prayer thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God’s healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings.

The discipline of prayer allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.”

(Nouwen, Making All Things New).

Examining Our View of God

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.” (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*.)

“Most of us developed our concepts and feelings about our heavenly Father from our earthly mothers and fathers, and these feelings become intertwined and confused. But the guilty and contradictory feelings are not the voice of God. They are often the continuing voice of Mother or Dad or Brother or Sister, or something internalized that puts pressure on us. Most of our basic patterns for relating come from the patterns of the relationships of our family.” (David Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*).

According to Tozer, our images of God are critically important to our spiritual well being. And according to Seamands, these images of God are formed to a large extent by our experiences in our family.

Because none of us lived in perfect families, we all have some distortions about what God is like. In times of crises, like the crisis created by a diagnosis of cancer, these distortions can cause spiritual uncertainty, because they get in the way of our ability to talk honestly with God or to trust God’s love for us.

Our images of God are our mental pictures of God. These mental pictures are more powerful than abstract ideas and doctrinal statements, because they are rooted in powerful emotional experiences. Our images of God impact how we feel about God and how we behave in response to God.

Scripture uses images to paint many powerful pictures of God. We can see God as the King, the Good Shepherd, the Mother Eagle, the Rock, the Fortress, the Compassionate Father, the Relentless Lover, the Creator, the Liberator, the Comforter.

An important aspect of discovering peace and hope in the midst of our struggle with cancer is to begin to exchange our distorted images of God, which came in part from negative family experiences, for biblically accurate images of God.

I pray that you, being rooted and established
in love, may have power to grasp
how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.
Ephesians 3:17

Examining Our View of God

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

Read Psalm 103.

1. What images of God does the author present?

2. Which one of these images stands out to you?

3. How could seeing God in this way be helpful to you this week?

Healing Prayer

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

Mark 1:40-42; 6:56

When we are faced with a life-threatening illness like cancer, we may find ourselves asking many questions about God. Why did God let this happen? Does God care about what is happening? Can I ask God to heal me? Does God want to heal me?

Physical healing is something we all long for and ask for. Yet our prayers are not answered in the same way. Some people who have cancer are dramatically healed. Others are healed after months of difficult treatment. Others battle cancer for the rest of their lives.

What are we to believe about healing? Is healing a stamp of approval on our faith? Do those people with plenty of faith receive healing and those with little faith get no healing?

The Bible shows us clearly a God who heals. Jesus came to reveal God to us. He came healing the sick. He touched people and physically healed them. And his disciples did the same.

But the Bible presents life in all its complexity. There are few simple answers about any of the real questions in life. God is a healing God. Yet Paul, a man of great faith and obedience to God was not healed of a physical ailment in spite of his repeated prayers for healing. Life is full of mystery.

Scripture teaches us to ask for healing. It teaches us that God is the author of good and not of evil. And it reminds us that God as a healing God. We are invited to ask for our heart's desires. And then we are asked to trust God with the outcome.

If you, then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:11

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

Healing Prayer

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What fears or difficulties do you have as you think about praying for healing for yourself or someone you love?

2. What experience have you had with God's healing in your life?

3. What are your feelings about Jesus' response to the man with leprosy in the story from Mark's gospel?

Healing Prayer

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. What encourages you to pray for healing?

2. What feelings do you have in response to the image of God presented in Hebrews 4:16?

3. What emotional, spiritual or physical healing would you like to ask God for today?

The Lord Is With Us

The Lord replied, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'
Then Moses said to him, 'If your presence does not go with us,
do not send us up from here'
Ex 33:14-15

How important God's presence is to us! All of us who live with cancer have faced difficult seasons when we have felt alone. We are alone with our thoughts as we contemplate the seriousness of a diagnosis; alone lying in the hospital awaiting surgery; alone spending long anxious moments under the eye of the scanner; alone with the seemingly endless discomfort of treatment; alone during sleepless nights; alone with our helplessness! We are alone but for one glorious truth. The Lord is with us!

We are not always able to experience God's presence with us. Sometimes when we feel overwhelmed with the side effects of treatment, or discouraged by low energy, or anxious about the future, God may seem very far away. Perhaps one of the worst pains of all to endure is this spiritual pain of feeling separated from God.

The truth is, however, that God is with us whether we are able to experience God's presence or not. God is with us in the midst of our darkest moments of life. Scriptures tells us that God goes before us, surrounds us, guides us, holds us by the hand and carries us in loving arms.

To you I call, O Lord my Rock;
do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those
who have gone down to the pit.
Hear my cry for mercy
as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands
toward your Most Holy Place.

Praise be to the Lord
for he has heard my cry for mercy.
The Lord is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and I am helped.
My heart leaps for joy
and I will give thanks to him in song.
Psalm 28:1-2, 6-7

The Lord is With Us

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

“You have let me experience the joys of life
and the exquisite pleasures of your own eternal presence.”
Psalms 16:11 (Living Bible)

1. Describe a specific time in your journey with cancer when God seemed far away.
2. What was that experience like for you?
3. What was helpful to you at that time?
4. Describe a specific time when you were especially aware of God's presence with you.

The Lord is With Us

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy that you are tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be--or so it feels--welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After then, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.

(C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.)

1. What thoughts and feelings do you have about this quote from C.S.Lewis?

2. What is frightening about such an experience?

3. If you were in Lewis' place what would you want most from friends?

4. What would you want most from God?

Pictures of God's Healing Presence

Scripture is rich with imagery of God's healing, protective presence with us. As we live with the uncertainties and fears that come with cancer, we can find strength and hope in reflecting on these images.

Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me,
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
Psalm 23:4

This psalm pictures God as our good Shepherd who provides for us and stays close to us. The shepherd's rod and staff were used to gently touch the sheep as they walked along, as a way of letting the sheep know that the shepherd had not deserted them, but was right there, walking with them, even through the dark and frightening valleys.

It is possible to find courage even in the valley of the shadow of death, because we are not alone. When it seems our hearts will give way with fear, we do well to remember that God is with us. We are known. We are loved. We are never alone. We can walk through this valley and fear no evil.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit
out of the mud and mire;
He set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
Psalm 40:2

Sometimes we feel like we are slipping. Nothing in life is certain anymore. We seem to have fallen into a pit full of mud and mire. And every time we try to crawl our way out, we end up slipping back in. Then one day we see God's hand stretched out to us. God offers to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God's hand is strong, God's clasp is certain. God pulls us out of the slimy pit and sets us on the firm, solid rock of God's love.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom
and broke away their chains.
Psalm 107:13-14

The fear that cancer brings can be like a dark cloud over us. It is a cloud that robs us of our ability to see the future. It keeps us from feeling the warmth of God's love. The fear that cancer brings can also feel like a chain around us. It is a chain that keeps us from experiencing the joys of everyday life. It holds us back from living fully. But God sees our distress. God brings us out of the darkness, into the warm light of God's love. God breaks away our chains and sets us free.

Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the rising sun will come to us from heaven,
to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.
Luke 1:78-79

May your awareness of God's tender mercies in your life grow with each new day. May you feel the rising sun of His presence shining on you. May he give you his peace.

Pictures of God's Healing Presence

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. Look at the verse from Psalm 23. What experiences have you had with walking through the valley of the shadow of death?

2. How has God been a comfort to you in those times?

3. Psalm 40 presents a picture of "slipping". When have you experienced yourself "slipping" in your journey with cancer?

4. What help have you experienced from God in those times?

Pictures of God's Healing Presence

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. Psalm 107 and Luke 1 use the image of darkness. What dark times have you had in your experience with cancer?

2. What experiences have you had with light breaking through that darkness?

3. What other images of God's healing presence have been helpful to you?

Section 4

Changing Perspectives

Cancer challenges us emotionally and spiritually. It also challenges us intellectually. We find ourselves searching for meaning and understanding. We find ourselves rethinking our values and priorities. We find ourselves developing new abilities to accept ourselves as limited and finite. In the midst of the danger that cancer presents, we find opportunities for growth.

The Seasons Of Survival

“We got it all. At this point you are free of cancer.”

These are words of relief and ecstasy—both to people who have had a diagnosis of cancer and to their families. But the ecstasy often turns to nagging worries as we face the reality of frequent check-ups and heightened awareness of old aches and pains. The reality is, these words are followed by “seasons of survival.”

The first “season of survival” is the acute survival season. It is the time that follows the diagnosis of cancer. This is often a time of disbelief and acute anxiety. During this time we gather information about cancer and its treatment. We make important decisions about treatment options. We inform our extended family and friends. We gather all the energy and resources we can to fight against cancer. And then we undertake the fight by going through treatment.

The next season is the season of extended survival. This is the time following our treatment course. It is a time of relief and fatigue. And it is a time when we experience a mixture of hope and renewed fears about the possibility of a recurrence. During this time our trips to the doctor’s office are still quite frequent. And each visit brings us face to face once again with our worst fears.

The third season is the permanent survival season. This is the time of prolonged remission or cure. It is a time we hope will take us into old age. During this season we are free of cancer, but the reality of the diagnosis remains a part of our self understanding. Cancer has changed us deeply. It has left a lasting impression.

May your seasons of survival be times of discovering new friends, new inner strength, and a deeper experience of God’s love for you.

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity
under heaven,
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance.
Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Seasons of Survival

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

Think about the various seasons you have experienced with cancer. Share some specific experiences from the various seasons you have been through.

In the acute survival season.

In the extended survival season.

In the permanent survival season.

Seasons of Survival

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

Think about the various seasons you have experienced with cancer. Share some specific needs you experienced during the various seasons you have been through.

In the acute survival season.

In the extended survival season.

In the permanent survival season.

Living Sanely in An Insane World

Jesus and his disciples came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10: 38-42

Many of us identify with Martha in this story. She welcomed Jesus to her home. She worked hard to serve him and her family. She was angry that her sister wasn't working. Jesus' response was to lovingly tell Martha that she was worried and upset about many things, but that she had forgotten what was most important in life.

One of the opportunities that cancer brings is the opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and to reconsider our values. Cancer stops us. It gives us pause to think. It causes us to ask hard questions about who we are and what we value most in life.

Because of the demands of everyday life, we often lose sight of these things. We are very busy. And we seem to like it that way. We spend our lives reacting and responding to the endless demands that are made on us. Rarely do we evaluate. Rarely do we reflect. Rarely do we look inward.

Cancer helps us do all these things. Money, power, status and prestige suddenly seem less important. Relationships and spiritual growth take on deeper meaning. We often have an increased desire to spend more time relating to ourselves, others and God.

The opportunity to reflect and evaluate can be one of the gifts that cancer brings into our lives. In the moments of solitude and reflection that cancer brings, we are able to reconsider what our lives are all about. Here's how Henri Nouwen talks about this:

Solitude is the place of purification and transformation, the place of the great struggle and the great encounter. Solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end. It is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world.... In solitude our heart of stone can be turned into a heart of flesh, a rebellious heart into a contrite heart, and a closed heart into a heart that can open itself to all suffering people in a gesture of solidarity. (Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*).

Living Sanelly In An Insane World

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. Think of a time when doing too many things created a problem for you and describe the problems it created.

2. What unrealistic expectations do you have of yourself that might lead you to over doing?

3. What changes in values and priorities have you experienced because of cancer?

One Day At A Time

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the Lord's great love
we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3:21-23

Cancer means that we can no longer pretend that we are immortal. Our mortality and human frailties become very real to us. We no longer assume that the future is ours. Each day becomes a gift of life. We learn to live one day at a time.

One of the reasons we do well to live one day at a time is because the fear of what the future might hold can overwhelm us. When we are in early stages of surviving cancer, we are especially vulnerable to experiencing a great deal of anxiety as we think about next month or next year or the next five years. We can become so focused on the "what ifs" about the future that we miss enjoying the gift of life today.

Jesus said "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:34). Peter reminded us that we can "cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us." (1 Peter 5:7) We can release our tomorrows into God's tender care so that we can be free to fully embrace his gift of today.

It can be a helpful practice to begin each day with a simple prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of life today. This practice can help us to stay focused on the present and to live each day to its fullest.

It is also helpful to find other simple ways to embrace the gift of today. Saying "I love you" to family members, calling a friend, writing a note, taking a walk, noticing the beauty of God's world around us are a few examples. John Claypool wrote about this in his book entitled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*:

Only when life is seen as a gift and received with the open hands of gratitude is it the joy God meant for it to be....The way of gratitude does not alleviate pain, but it somehow puts some light around the darkness and builds strength to begin to move on. (*Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*).

May you celebrate the gift of life today.

Positive Thinking

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers
in view of God’s mercy,
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices
holy and pleasing to God -
this is your spiritual act of worship.
Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed
by the renewing of your mind.”

Romans 12:1-2a

We often see newspaper articles or television shows which discuss the important links between our minds and our bodies. Sometimes the idea that our physical health is influenced by our mental health is treated as a startling new idea. And so it is to the modern western world, which several hundred years ago came to see the body and the mind as two separately functioning entities. But the ancient wisdom of Scripture has taught us all along that the body, mind and spirit are a unit.

This ‘new’ discussion in our media about the mind-body link includes conversations about the possibility that what we think with our minds can change our physical health. Some people suggest that we can fight cancer more effectively if we engage in “positive thinking.”

There are some exciting aspects to this idea, and some potentially confusing aspects as well.

The idea that we can participate in our recovery and health is an exciting idea. We do not have to be passive people who do whatever the doctor says without asking questions or considering alternatives. We can ask questions, and gather information, and learn to be assertive partners with our doctors. We can develop positive attitudes towards our sometimes difficult treatments, seeing them as God’s gift of healing in our lives. We can also learn how to live more sanely, how to cope with stress, and how to rest and play. And we can learn to engage our imaginations as we pray for health and strength. These are exciting possibilities.

The confusion in the “positive thinking” movement is that we can draw the conclusion that we somehow caused our cancer by not thinking correctly. It is also very confusing to conclude that if we change our thinking, we could then cure ourselves of cancer. Cancers are complex diseases with multiple causes. We know that environmental toxins, genetics, a depressed immune system are but a few of the contributing factors. We cannot cause or cure cancer by thinking positively. God has not given us either that responsibility or that power.

God invites us to give ourselves to God — body, mind and soul — in a relationship of love and trust. It is good for us to develop honest, positive perspectives which grow in the rich soil of a love relationship with God. But God does not ask us to bear the heavy burden of being responsible for things that are beyond our control.

May you be transformed by the renewing of your mind as you reflect on God’s love for you.

Positive Thinking

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. In what ways has the idea that you need to have a positive attitude been a problem or a burden for you?

2. How has the idea of positive thinking been helpful to you?

3. What role do you think your perspective or attitude plays in your experience with cancer?

Positive Thinking

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. Romans 12:1-2 suggests that we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds. How has your faith renewed your thinking?

2. How has your renewed thinking transformed your life?

3. What does it mean to have a positive outlook about living with cancer?

4. What things help contribute to a positive outlook for you as you live with cancer?

Accepting Our Need for Help

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:9-12

This is Matthew's own account of being called by Jesus. He was an outcast because he profited from evil. The religious people saw him as a sinner, to be judged and rejected. Jesus did not argue about whether or not Matthew was a sinner. But he disagreed with the people about the implications of this fact. Jesus responded not with judgment but with love. He said that it was people like Matthew that he had come to call. Jesus came for people in need. He went out of his way to find such people and to spend time with them.

Of course, the truth is that all people are in need, but not all of us accept this about ourselves. In fact, some of us work very hard to cover and compensate for our neediness. We do not accept ourselves as needy.

Many of us are accustomed to being the person who helps others. We may have always been in the giving role. So the diagnosis of cancer hits us especially hard. We are required to step out of the role of always giving and learn what it means to receive. This can be a frightening and difficult change.

We do well to remember that it is when we accept the reality of our neediness that we are open to receive God's grace and goodness. When we are independent and competent and righteous, we shut God out. We do not see our real need of the One who made us.

This story from Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus accepts us as we are. He knows our real needs, even when we deny them. Jesus does not want us to try to prove ourselves to him, but rather to depend on him.

As you struggle to accept your experience with the many needs that cancer has brought into your life, may you find hope and joy in knowing that it is God's desire to meet those many needs.

May you understand that God desires that you learn mercy by first of all being merciful to yourself.

May God's mercy bring deep healing to your body, mind and spirit.

Accepting Our Need for Help

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. In what ways is it difficult for you to be on the receiving end of someone else's care?

2. What experiences have you had with this?

3. How have these experiences effected you?

Building Friendships

In trouble like this,
I need loyal friends.
Job 6:14

We know that cancer threatens our health and our lives. But one reality that we may not have anticipated is that cancer can threaten our friendships. Not everyone can be supportive to us when cancer enters our lives. In fact, some friends may seem to disappear from our lives at the moment we seem to need them most.

The reasons some friends disappear are varied and complex. But it may be due in part to the fact that our cancer threatens their lives with emotional pain. They may be afraid they will lose us. They may be afraid of grief. They may be afraid they will not know what to say or to do to be helpful to us.

We need friends more than ever when cancer enters our lives. We need to do what we can to build solid relationships with people who are able to stick with us through our experiences with cancer. The pay off for building friendships at this time is that these relationships will take on a new depth and richness because of the emotional and spiritual intensity of what we are experiencing with cancer.

To develop supportive relationships there are several things we can do.

First, we can realize that the diagnosis of cancer will evoke a variety of strong feelings in our friends. This is a reality we can talk about together. We can tell our friends that we know they will have feelings about what we are going through, and that we would welcome them to talk about those feelings with us if they can.

Second, we can be honest about our own feelings and struggles. When we talk about what goes on inside of us it keeps people from having to guess about what we are thinking and feeling. And when we share our inner lives with people, it allows them to move closer to us emotionally.

Third, we can be specific about any needs we have that our friends can meet. And we can make it clear to them that they do not need to do anything or say anything to make us feel better. We can share with them that what we need most is their presence with us.

Finally, we can tell those friends who seem to be withdrawing, that we miss them. We can tell them that we realize that this is a very difficult experience we are going through and that they might have all kinds feelings about it. We can tell them that if they want to talk about it with us, it would be good. We need to do this realizing that they may be unable to be responsive at the time.

May your friendships deepen throughout your seasons of survival.

Building Friendships

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

Job made specific requests of his friends in his time of need. Read the following requests and discuss why each of these are important to a person living with cancer and to his or her family.

“Do not let my wild words surprise you.”

If my troubles and griefs were weighted on scales
they would weigh more than the sand of the sea.
My wild words should not surprise you.
Job 6:1-3

“Be loyal to me, even if I have forsaken God.”

In trouble like this I need loyal friends
whether I’ve forsaken God or not.
But you, my friends, you deceive me like a stream
that goes dry when no rain comes.
You are like those streams to me;
you see my fate and are shocked.
Job 6:14-15,21

“Respect me.”

Everything you say, I have heard before.
I understand it all. I know as much as you do.
I am not your inferior.
Job 13:1-2

“Listen to me.”

Listen to what I am saying,
that is all the comfort I ask from you.
Give me a chance to speak.
Job 21:1-3

“Pray for me.”

You have worn me out, God;
You have let my family be killed.
You have seized me. You are my enemy.
I am skin and bones,
and people take that as proof of my guilt.
I want someone to plead with God for me,
as a man pleads for his friends.
Job 16:7-8,20

(Good News Bible)

Perspectives on Treatment

The diagnosis of cancer for some is followed by months or years of chemotherapy. For others it is followed by weeks of radiation. For some, it is followed by both.

Cancer cells are cells that are out of control. Chemotherapy and radiation work by destroying rapidly dividing cells. The problem is, of course, that some healthy cells in our bodies are rapidly dividing cells. Cells such as hair cells and blood cells and the cells that line our mouths and our entire gastrointestinal tract are all rapidly dividing cells that can be effected by the treatment of cancer.

As a result, chemotherapy and radiation treatments can have significant side effects. The primary side effect is that these treatments dramatically drain our energy. We are exhausted as our bodies try to compensate for fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen and as our bodies work overtime to replace those lost cells.

Sometimes chemotherapy and radiation can begin to seem like an enemy. We take the treatment knowing it will make us feel worse. We may begin to associate the treatments with getting sick rather than with getting well. This perspective can cause us to fight psychologically against the very thing we need to regain our health.

It is important in our battle against cancer that we see treatment as our friend. We need to turn around the association between our treatment and feeling ill, and establish an association between our treatment and our health.

Treatment can be seen as a gift from God. It is God's provision for us. Our treatments are marvelously designed to destroy the cancer cells that we want to be rid of. Sometimes the cancer can be stopped and even eliminated by the treatments we take.

To make the connection between our treatment and our health, there are several things we can do. Some people find it helpful to hang a sign on their mirror or door that says "Chemotherapy is a Good Gift From God." Others give thanks for their treatment each time they take it, asking God to anoint the treatment with God's healing power. Others visualize the treatment attacking the cancer cells, gobbling them up or slaying them. Some people do all of those things.

May you see your treatments as a gift. May God use your treatments to bring healing to your body.

Perspectives on Treatment

Questions for Discussion - Week 1

1. What treatments have you (or your loved one) received for your cancer?

2. What side effects did you experience?

3. What was your emotional response to those side effects?

4. What helps you to see your treatment as a friend rather than an enemy?

Perspectives on Treatment

Questions for Discussion - Week 2

1. Draw a picture of your treatment attacking the cancer cells.

2. Write a prayer thanking God for your treatment.

Coping With Pain

Physical pain is one of the realities that sometimes comes with cancer. It may be pain caused by surgery, or pain caused by pressure from a tumor, or pain that is the result of the effects of treatment. For some of us, the experience of pain is short lived. For some it comes and goes on a regular basis. And for others it is always there.

Pain disrupts our sleep, our appetite, our mood, our ability to work or concentrate, our sociability and sometimes even our hope.

Pain wears us out. It is physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting to live with pain. Our muscles tighten to protect the area that is hurting and our entire body is signaled to go into a state of alert. Our minds race through questions about what is causing the pain and how long it will last. And our hearts are overwhelmed with the emotions of fear and depression.

Pain also effects us socially. It makes us irritable. We do not have the energy or perspective to be patient with noise or demands or other people's needs. We may find ourselves snapping at the people we love or withdrawing to be alone.

Learning to live with pain is an important task. We need, first of all, to acknowledge its presence and the toll it is taking on us personally. Take an inventory. What pain do you experience? When? How often? How does it effect your sleep? Appetite? Perspective? Emotions?

Second, we need to let others know that we are in pain so they will understand what we are experiencing; so they can support us and pray for us; and so they can help us decide if and when we should inform our physician.

Third, we need to get extra rest. Pain wears us out. And fatigue will usually increase our pain and decrease our ability to tolerate it. It can become a vicious cycle of over-doing, having increased pain as a result, becoming worn out from the added pain and as a result of our fatigue, experiencing even more pain.

Fourth, we can learn the value of distractions. A good book, a conversation with a friend, an enjoyable activity that is not strenuous can all help us to be distracted from our pain. This is especially helpful once we know the pain is not a signal that we need additional medical care, and if the pain is chronic.

Fifth, we can learn how to relax. Our muscles tighten and we become anxious when we experience pain. This only serves to increase our pain. We can learn to relax our muscles and decrease our anxiety in order to decrease our pain. Listening to relaxing music, taking slow deep breaths for several minutes, and practicing relaxation exercises can all be helpful in learning to relax even when we are experiencing pain.

Finally, we can allow our pain to bring us back into God's presence. We can ask God to heal our pain, to comfort us and to give us new strength and hope.

Coping With Pain

Exercise for Discussion Week 2

One way of coping with pain is to practice relaxing. Ask a group member to read the following aloud for the group in a slow and soothing voice, while the group follows the instructions. It will take at least ten minutes to read. Pause between each sentence.

Ask people to discuss their response to this exercise when it is finished.

“One way to cope with pain and stress is to practice relaxation. So, tonight, I am going to lead you in a relaxation exercise. I am going to take you on an imaginary trip to the beach.

To do this exercise in relaxing, I want you to get in a comfortable position. For most people that means sitting with your feet flat on the floor with your hands in your lap. And either close your eyes, or look down at a fixed spot on the floor in front of you. The first thing I am going to ask you to do is to take a deep breath. When you take this breath, I want you to breathe in slowly through your nose, filling your lungs so that your belly rises, holding the air, and then slowly letting it go through your mouth. So let's do that together. Breathing in slowly, filling your lungs, letting your belly rise, holding it and slowly letting it out through your mouth. I want you to continue taking slow deep breaths, at a rate that is comfortable to you. As you breathe slowly and comfortably, I want you to let your body get heavy. Let your neck and shoulders get heavy. Let your arms get heavy. Let your legs get heavy. Be aware of your body as you sit in the chair. Continue to let your body get heavy. (Silence for 20 seconds.)

Now I want you to make a fist of your right hand. Make a tight fist. And hold it in a fist. Let all of the tension in your body go into that fist. Feel the discomfort in your fist. Hold it tight. Now let it go. Feel the warmth and tingling. Feel the difference between your hands. Now I want you to make fists of both your hands. Hold those fists. Let all the tension in your body go into your fists. Hold them tight. Now let them go.

Continue to breath slowly and comfortably. Continue to let your body get heavy. Continue to relax as you listen to the sound of my voice. You are going to take a brief imaginary trip to the ocean. I want you to see yourself standing at the top of a flight of ten stairs. At the bottom of the stairs is a door. You are going to go down the stairs and through the door to the beach as you follow my voice. Step down to step one. And two. And three. And four. And five. And six. And seven, eight and nine and ten. You are now at the door. Open it and go through.

Before you is a deserted beach. You can see sand stretched out before you. You can see the water beyond the sand. You can see the blue sky. You can hear the waves. And the sea gulls calling. Walk towards the water. You can sit or stand in front of the waves. Feel how peaceful it is here. Feel how relaxed you are. (Silence for 20 seconds). Think about what matters most to you in life. (Silence for 20 seconds.) You can see Jesus coming towards you along the beach. Let him come to you and greet you. Feel his love for you. See his joy in seeing you. Talk to him. You can tell him anything you want. (Silence for 30 seconds.) Enjoy being with him there at the water. (Silence for 30 seconds.)

You are going to go back to the door in a moment. But realize that you can come back here anytime. Realize how relaxed you are and that you will stay this relaxed as you go back up the stairs. Realize that Jesus will be coming with you.

Turn now and walk back to the door. When you get there look back at the sand and water and sky. Now open the door and go through with Jesus by your side. And go back up the stairs, following my voice. Step one and two. Step three. Step four and five. Step six. Step seven, eight, nine. And step ten. Take a deep cleansing breath. Hold it. Let it out through your mouth. And open your eyes when you are ready.

Repairing Our Self Esteem

Self esteem is the capacity to see ourselves as lovable, capable and valuable. It grows out of experiences of being known and loved for who we are. It grows out of experiences of unconditional love.

Many things can threaten our self esteem. If we were raised in homes where we experienced abuse, neglect or criticism, we may not have had a chance to grow healthy self esteem. If we experienced significant rejection from our peers for some physical, emotional or academic disability we may not see ourselves as valuable or capable.

If our self esteem is already fragile, the experience of cancer can be a significant threat. The diagnosis may make us feel less valuable. Surgery and treatment may alter our appearance and decrease our productivity, making us feel less lovable. Health care professionals and friends may make patronizing remarks that leave us feeling less capable.

Strength to live with cancer comes, in part, from a healthy self esteem. We need to know that we are valuable and that our lives are worth fighting for. We need to know that we are loved and lovable so that we have a reason to keep living.

No matter what past or current threats we face, we can begin to repair our self esteem.

We can pay attention to the negative messages we give ourselves and begin to replace those negative messages with positive messages of affirmation. We can replace our negative messages with affirming messages from God, reminding ourselves that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that God delights in us, that we are God's children.

We can also listen for the many ways people around us tell us that they love us and value us. We can teach ourselves to listen to these messages and encourage ourselves to believe them.

Finally, we can meditate on God's unconditional love for us. God knows us. God loves us. God seeks a relationship with us. In God's eyes we are valuable, lovable, capable.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful.
Psalm 139: 14

Repairing Our Self Esteem

Exercise for Discussion Week 1

1. What past events (before cancer) may have threatened your self esteem?

2. How has cancer (or its treatment) threatened your self esteem?

3. What specific things have helped you to know that you are loved by God?

Section 5

When a Group Member Dies

The most difficult reality we face as a group is the death of a group member. It is difficult because the loss of someone we have come to care about causes deep grief. And it is difficult because it brings us face-to-face with the reality of our own mortality.

We believe that it is critical to do the hard work of helping the group talk directly about the death of a group member. As a group you will want to honor the person who died by sharing some of what they meant to you. And you will want to talk about your feelings of gratitude for the person and your experiences of grief as you say good-bye to them. We have found that this kind of sharing can produce a mixture of tears and laughter. It becomes a celebration of the person who died and of our friendships with them.

One reason it is critical to talk together as a group about the death of a group member is that it is a way of valuing the life of the person who died. We need an opportunity to talk about how important the person was to us and to review the ways in which they enriched our lives. This can be a very positive experience as a group. It is good to remember ways the person made you laugh or ways they particularly touched you or cared for you. This helps people face the reality of the death and begin grieving. It helps people celebrate the person's life. And it helps people realize that should they die, they also will be remembered and missed.

Another reason it is critical to talk about someone's death is that it is the purpose of the group to talk about reality, no matter how sad or fearful. When we do not talk about reality directly, the message people receive is either that reality is too awful to talk about or that we don't have the personal resources we need to address this reality. When we do talk, it gives the group strength and a deeper bonding to know that they can do this hard work of grieving together.

Finally, the death of a group member will stir up people's worse fears and deepest emotions. If we are to function as a true support to each other, we need to talk together about these fears and feelings.

The script below provides a structure you can use to facilitate a group discussion after a group member dies. It may need to be adapted to fit well with your faith community. So, use it as a guideline. We keep a box of kleenex in our supplies and pass it around at all our meetings, but it is especially needed at this special kind of meeting.

Death is the ultimate act of living. It is an event to be paid attention to and respected. Together we live with cancer. And together we face death. The Bible calls death the 'final enemy.' It is an enemy that Jesus destroyed, making death a beginning rather than an ending. Take whatever time you need as a group to look and listen and learn from death. Take whatever time you need to say 'thank you,' and 'good-bye' to your friend who died.

Group Discussion After The Death of A Group Member

Tonight we need to do the difficult but important work of acknowledging the death of _____ (person's name). For those of you who did not know _____ (person's name), he/she _____ (give some history of the person's history with the group and about when they died.)

We want to talk about this together as a group for two reasons. First, we will miss this friend. We need to grieve our loss together. And secondly, when anyone we know dies it increases our fears about our own mortality.

I. Losses

It would be good for us to talk about _____ (person's name) for awhile. Share whatever comes to mind about him/her. Things he/she said, ways he/she touched your life or ministered to you. Things you enjoyed and now will miss about _____ (person's name).

(Allow time for people to share. You may need to allow time for silences especially during this sharing time as people reflect about the person and about their feelings about the person's death.)

II. Fears

It would also be good for us to talk about our fears. As we face the reality of death it creates real fears for us. What added fear or anxiety have you been aware of since hearing of _____ (person's name) death?

(Again, allow time for silence and discussion.)

III. Hope

We also need to reaffirm our hope.

First, we need to be reminded of our hope in life after death. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." (John 11:25). Jesus also said, "I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am." (John 14:2,3). And David wrote, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6).

Does anyone have any thoughts that they would like to share about how God's goodness and mercy extends beyond a life-time?

We also need to reaffirm our current hope for today. God continues to give each of us life today. We do well to affirm that gift, to receive that gift and to celebrate the life God continues to give us.

One way to reaffirm our continued gift of life is to continue to support each other and to pray for each other.

How can we pray for each other this week?

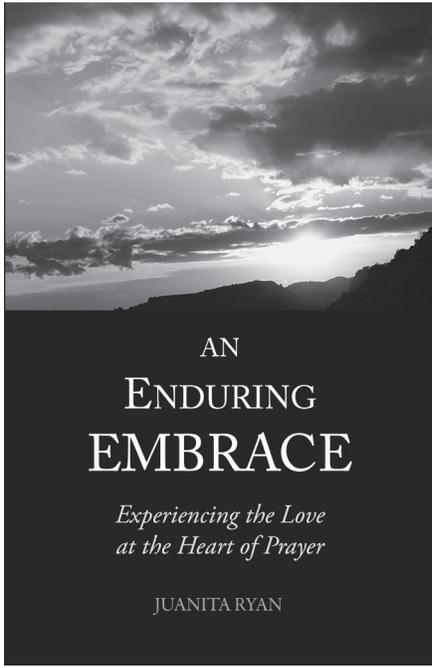
References and Resources

Books referenced

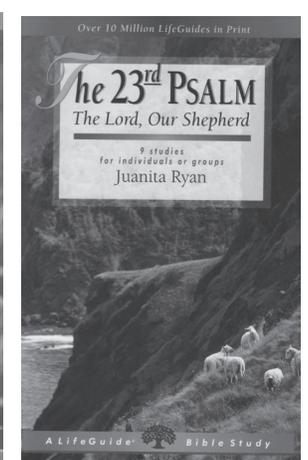
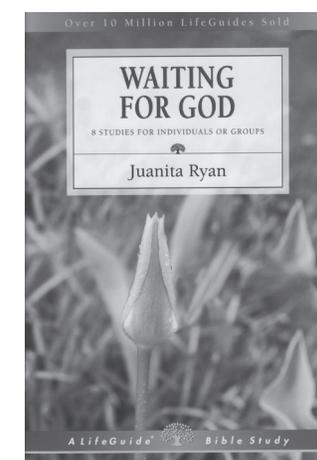
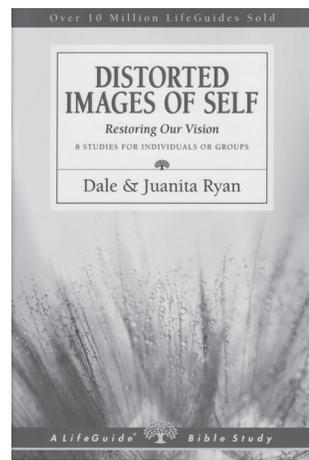
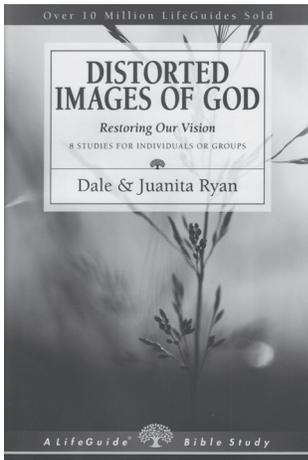
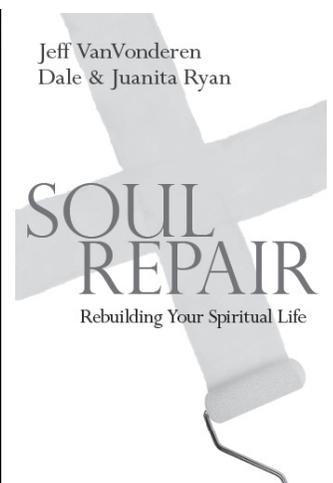
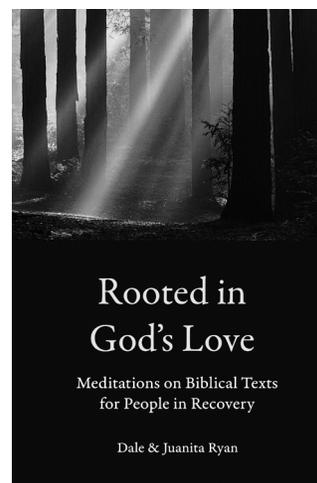
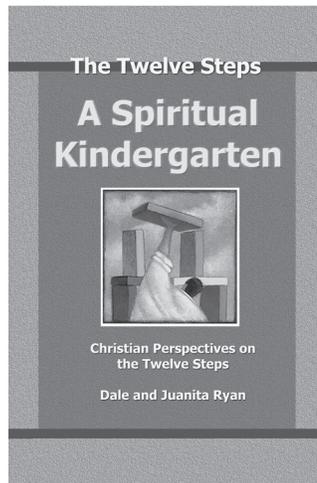
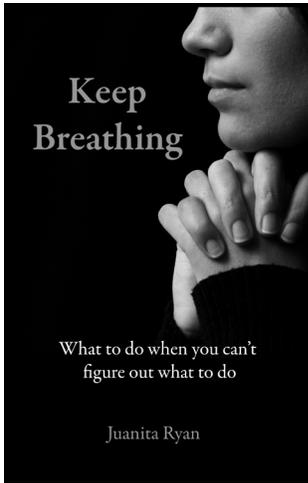
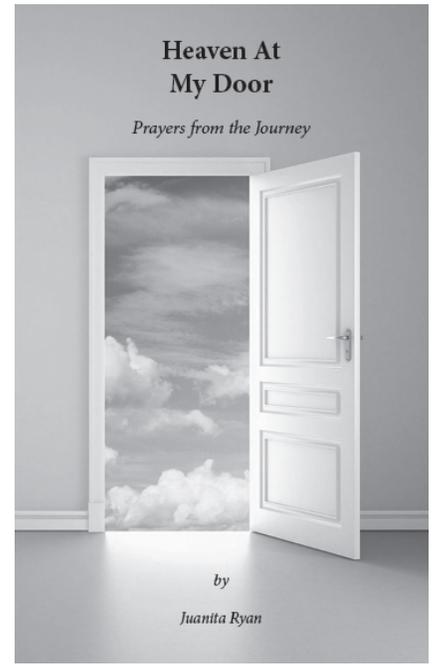
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Organizations

American Cancer Society	1 800 4 CANCER
Cancer Counseling Service	1 800 352-7422
Cancer Support Groups	1 800 222-5465 (California)
Self Help Groups	1 800 222- LINK



Other books written by Juanita Ryan



For more about Juanita, visit her website: www.juanitaryan.com