

Dear Cancer Patient, Here's What I Learned on My Cancer Journey

Patient advocate Melvin Mann was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia in 1995. He has been in treatment and in remission since 1998.

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I hear you've been diagnosed with cancer. I've been living with cancer for a long time, and I've learned a few lessons in my cancer journey. Let me share a few.

First, any cancer diagnosis is serious, so do not compare your situation with others. There is no "good cancer."

You may be in shock. That's normal. So is experiencing stages of grief, especially when faced with devastating news.

There is no right way to deal with cancer. Some people may not want to miss a day of work, while others do not want to get out of bed. You may want to tell nearly everyone about your illness or share it with only a close few. It's OK to express—or not to express—anxiety, anger, depression. It's OK to shed tears or not.

Not everyone will validate your feelings, even if they mean well. It's not your job to make that person feel a certain way. You do not have to listen to lectures about how you should feel or how you do not have enough faith or the right attitude to become well.

While the news is sinking in, this is a good time to get a second opinion. Doctors have different approaches, and medical centers have different capabilities. Even labs and pathology reports may have different interpretations.

Research your illness. Reach out to groups that deal with your cancer; they can provide resources and connect you with patients and caregivers. Think about joining a support group, whether in person or online.

Ask about clinical trials. Some study drugs are available years before the Food and Drug Administration approves them. Even the current standard of care was available to some before it became the first-line therapy.

As a patient, you don't need to be passive or aggressive, but do aim to be assertive. Keep up with your records and medications, ask your doctor questions, listen carefully and keep those closest to you up to date. Bring someone with you to appointments; you may not hear or remember everything. Think about establishing a support team of people who can assist you throughout your journey. Remember to thank them, as caregiving is not an easy task.

During your treatment, you probably will experience some fatigue, nausea and pain. These side effects may not be visible to others. (In fact, some may even say, "You don't look sick.") Rest when you need to. It's OK to say no to requests and conserve energy for your cancer journey.

Stay hydrated and eat well. You may not always have the appetite to eat, but do try to keep your weight up. Get outside in the fresh air for a bit of exercise if you can, as this can help on many fronts.

Do your best at keeping your spirits up. This may involve trying integrative therapies (such as meditation, yoga and tai chi), watching comedies, accepting help, forgiving others, listening to music, seeking spiritual connections and doing things that you enjoy. What works for you is unique to you.

Maintain hope. You are not a statistic. You are an individual. You are more than a cancer patient. Keep doing the things that you enjoy, as you are still you.

After you finish your treatment, consider paying it forward. Share the knowledge you've gained, raise awareness, become a patient advocate or find another activity that supports cancer patients. Lastly, keep your head up!