



Coping with physical distancing

- Brigitte Lavoie

We don't always choose what happens to us. I didn't choose to have cancer two years ago, and we didn't choose to have a pandemic this year. You probably know that chemotherapy can wipe out the immune system. For me, this meant practicing physical distancing for five months, because I could have died from a simple flu. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? I am a psychologist and I offer training in Solution-focused brief therapy, resilience, and post-traumatic growth. I wrote this to share some of the results of research that helped me to have more good days than bad days during a year of treatment for cancer. This knowledge helped me so much that I wanted to share it with as many people as possible.

Think carefully about the headlines you use to describe your life

The words we use to describe our experience will influence the emotions we have. You might be inspired by the headlines in the news these days and tell yourself that *life will never be the same*, that *your world is turned upside down*, that *the consequences will be disastrous*, that *we will never get over this*, and so on.

When they told me I had cancer in 2018, I read a lot of messages like this. Trying to learn about my condition, I read that the treatments would have a permanent impact on my appearance and self-esteem, that the side effects would be terrible, that I might never recover from the financial blow, and that I would be lucky if my couple survived. It wasn't enough to know that I had cancer and that I might die. Experts thought it was important to warn me that, even if I did survive, my life would not be that great.

None of these negative predictions are helpful and they don't prepare us for anything. All they do is break down our morale. The media collects all the worst news they can find and chooses the headlines that will grab our attention the most. We can't stop this- it's how they work. But we can control the messages we tell ourselves and what we say to our friends and loved ones when we talk about our week. Of course, we need to know about some dangers so we can stay safe. But it doesn't help, and it can even be harmful, to imagine the worst.

After my cancer, some things changed for the worse **and** some things changed for the better. And a lot of things stayed exactly the **same**. I know that my personal experience is not exactly the same as what is going on in the world right now. But it is highly probably that after COVID-19, some things will get worse and other things will get better. History teaches us that after a tragedy, life goes on. It is highly likely that many aspects of our lives will remain unchanged.

In the mean time, how will you choose to describe what you are going through? Last year, when the nurses would ask me how I was doing, I would answer, "*Aside from the cancer, my life is pretty good.*" It made them smile, and it made my life easier. Some people will say that this is positive thinking or even denial. But it isn't. I knew very well what was happening to me. I had moments of sadness and a lot of pain. I would really have preferred not to have cancer. And I would have preferred not to have all my contracts cancelled when I was finally able to return to work. But cancer wasn't my whole life, and COVID-19 is not our whole life. **You are the journalist covering your own life. Choose your headlines carefully. They will have an impact on your level of anxiety and your ability to enjoy the life you still have.**

Choose who you compare yourself to

Did you know that athletes who win the bronze medal tend to be happier than those who win the silver? When I would compare myself to people who didn't have cancer (the gold medal winners), I would feel irritated and resentful. When I compared myself to those who did not have access to universal health care, whose side effects were worse than mine, or those who didn't have a family to support them, I was happy to be standing on the podium and I felt I had won. These days, I compare myself with those who are being treated for cancer in 2020 rather than in 2019. I have compassion for them and I feel gratitude for the timing of this pandemic. My bronze medal is the return of my immune system. **How about you? Who are you comparing yourself to these days? Is it helping? If so, continue. If you are spending too much time looking at the gold medal winner, turn around and look down. Take some time to see those who are not on the podium.**

Dealing with physical distancing

Choose to remember that you have experience getting through difficulty

What have you been through in the past that can help you get through the next few weeks? You might be tempted to say: nothing. I have never been through a pandemic or isolation like this. I would invite you to think about it again. What have you been through that is close enough to give you some good ideas? I had never been on sick leave, but when I looked back, I found my maternity leave! You can see right away that a maternity leave is really different from a sick leave. The first was chosen, the second was endured. But there were enough similarities to inspire me.

For example, even if we love our children very much, we have to admit that they are a little boring sometimes. There's a reason they put an age range on boxes for toys. They're not supposed to be intellectually stimulating for people who are older than the recommended age. During a maternity leave, there may be lot of solitude as well, because everyone else around us is at work.

When you look at it more closely, you find a lot of similarities with a sick leave. So I made a conscious effort to remember what helped me during my maternity leave: how I structured my days, how I dealt with being isolated. I won't go into examples, because it's better that you think about your own. What is your example? Was it after a work accident? A job loss? Maybe even a trip that you did on your own? Again, don't get bogged down in the differences. Look for similarities and things you did that can be transferred. Even if a trip is wonderful, there can be moments of loneliness or boredom. How did you get past that? If you can't think of a particular example, think about your qualities and talk to your friends and family. Maybe it's your sense of humour or your ability to put things in perspective, or the fact that you are hard-working and organized.

Maybe you have a t-shirt that says "*I survived the Goliath.*" It's the same idea. What roller coasters have you been on that can help you with the next ones? Think about these questions in the next few days. **What experience do I have from the past that has prepared me for this? What have I gotten through that might give me the strength and the skills I need to get through the next few weeks?**

Choose to feel hopeful- you might surprise yourself

When I found out that I had cancer, I wasn't sure if I had what it takes to get through it. Fortunately, I knew about research done by Daniel Gilbert that showed that people are better at getting through difficulties than they think

they are. Many people think they would never get over a divorce, losing their job, losing a child, cancer, a terrorist attack, or a pandemic. However, the majority are surprised by the strength that they find during these difficult periods. **People underestimate their capacity to cope. When confronted with extraordinary events, they discover unexpected strengths.**

At first, I couldn't tell myself, "*It's going to be okay*". I didn't believe it at the beginning. But I could tell myself, "*You are a human being. You are probably underestimating your ability to get through this.*" It even made me smile to think to myself, "*There is nothing so unique about you that you would react differently from most people.*" It was just enough to raise a doubt, to let me hope that something better might happen, even if I wasn't sure exactly what it would be. It made me feel better. One of my clients once said, "***Doubt is the beginning of hope.***" **It's so true. If you have doubt in your inability, it might be the beginning of believing in yourself. You don't have to be sure to have hope.**

In the last couple of weeks, my family has gotten back to our hand-washing routine. In our house, the smell of bleach is a little bit comforting. I have gone back to doing things that helped me in the past. It helps to know that I already have the t-shirt. I hope that you will find yours.

It's going to be okay.