For me, as a psychologist, it is always very satisfying to help others with problems that worry or depress them. Unfortunately, very recently, I had my own issue of great concern. In March of 2013, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. After so many years of helping clients with their anxieties, I now was facing my own fears in having a potentially life-threatening illness.

At the beginning, a breast cancer diagnosis can feel scary and overwhelming. Suddenly, you are given a lot of new and confusing information in order to make a life-saving surgical decision. My options were lumpectomy, a surgical procedure that removes the cancer itself, or mastectomy that removes the whole breast, with or without reconstruction. Consulting with doctors as well as other cancer survivors and sorting out my own personal feelings, I experienced many moments of confusion and anxiety.

In time, I was able to turn to my own favorite therapy approach, cognitive behavior modification that I have so often used in assisting others in my practice. This method confronts a client’s irrational beliefs and ideas in order to minimize self-defeating emotions and behaviors. In essence, you have to learn to talk to yourself in a reasonable way. As an example, any idea that I could have prevented this illness would be irrational and would make me feel even more anxious. After all, I am just another human being, as vulnerable as anyone else to serious illness. I needed to accept the reality of the cancer and to let go of the belief that I should have total control and complete certainty about future outcomes.

The attitude of acceptance became one of my most helpful coping strategies in managing my fears. First, by letting go, I was better able to face an unfortunate reality without self-blame or criticism. Second, an attitude of acceptance enabled me to feel emotions without trying to push them away or to avoid the feelings altogether. So, whatever feelings surfaced, whether sadness (about the unpleasant nature of the situation), fear (of the unknown), anger (because there is no way to prevent this), or confusion (having to weigh imperfect options), I stayed with them all without letting myself feel weak or powerless. In time, acceptance of these emotions, as natural human reactions, led me to a feeling of compassion, not only for myself but for all others who had or will have experienced what I then was experiencing.

Although it is normal to feel unpleasant emotions as they come and go, it is also important to stay as positive as you can about having breast cancer. In order to maintain a positive outlook,
I've tried to be mindful of not letting my thoughts and internal images turn to the worst-case scenario. Moreover, I reminded myself that there is effective treatment for the disease, and the rate of survival is very high -- especially if caught early. And, if thoughts of unpleasant treatments or side effects came to mind, I told myself that a long and healthy life, enjoying future celebrations with family and friends is more important than temporary physical discomfort.

And speaking of family and friends, I was so grateful for their reaching out and being there for me. Their outpourings of good wishes and prayers offered me comfort and reassurance that I was not alone. Even those who were only acquaintances had been easy to reach out to for support, questions, and information. Of course, occasionally, friends or family members inadvertently said things that weren't helpful, such as asking too many questions or mentioning something that scared me. However, I reminded myself that they were trying their best to be helpful and no one can do that perfectly. Also, being able to accept and appreciate social support made it a lot easier when waiting for test results, undergoing treatment, and completing the healing process.

Whereas friends and family members stood by me, I tried very hard not to lose my sense of self throughout this ordeal. My belief then was that I am, and will always be, more than the cancer. I continued to keep up my usual routine both at home and at work. Whatever I always enjoyed doing, I continued to do. Although my health needs were my priorities, engaging in pleasurable social activities and keeping up my work with clients helped to keep my life as normal as possible. Moreover, there is one huge benefit that came from this whole experience: One never really knows what can happen very suddenly, therefore, my advice is to live each day with enthusiasm and gratitude. Wake up taking care of things you might otherwise put off. The idea that life is very precious now means even more to me than it used to.

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