

Physician S.O.S.  
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Dedicated to my fellow colleagues, in the event that you should end up on a similar path [recovering from a cancer diagnosis].

I write this so that my success may be your success. I am writing about 4.5 years into my survivorship with stage 4 lung cancer (ALK-rearranged NSCLC). My scans showed no evidence of disease [NED] 6 months into treatment and have remained that way. Oncologists refer to this as a “durable, sustained, and complete response.” Here are the things I did/continue to do that I think helped me survive:

1. **Assemble your winning team:**

1. Your doctor and medical team (this may take a while, and you might have to fire one or two oncologists, until you get one that believes in you and whom you believe in as well). You can also have 2 oncology teams, one locally to handle the day-to-day, and a research team at one of the major comprehensive cancer centers.
2. Your S.O.S. work champion (a.k.a. a colleague you trust, see below)
3. Your inner circle of support:
  1. A “researcher”
  2. A “PR” person, to communicate to friends and family, manage a website, meal train, interface with work, etc.
  3. “companion/confidante,” a person who loves you, knows you, your family, faith (or lack thereof), and your values, who can take you to appointments, ask to record the doctor, or take notes, and asks good questions in your best interest. This can be a spouse, best friend, parent . . . a “tried and true” person
  4. A child support person, if you have children. Someone who can take the kids for a while, or do drop off and pick up.

2. **Faith:** You don’t have to do it immediately, but, try to find a way to have faith/belief [can be secular or religious] in something, whether it’s something that someone says to you, or in your doctor, or in God’s love for you, or faith that you deserve to live, that you are worthy of the love and life you have been given. Once you have this, you can literally move mountains. Game-changer! You may not survive cancer, ultimately, but faith will allow you to prevent it from stealing your joy and inner light. Faith is the remedy for fear. In my experience, I was only able to fight fear successfully with faith. Otherwise, it is far too easy to fall into despair. You deserve much, much, much better.

3. **Take medical leave:** don’t try to convince yourself that work will effectively distract you from your work. It’s the other way around. You will cling to your work like no one’s business, because you’ll suddenly realize how much medicine defines you to yourself. It will feel as though cancer is kidnapping you away from yourself. Be patient. Cancer can

be a great teacher, *if* you allow it. Think of medical leave as a sabbatical, where your area of study is *what best nurtures and heals you?*

4. **Don't immediately give up your career because you've assumed only the worst will happen to you** [happens to the best of us]. Some diagnoses take up to 1 month to refine, which has significant implications for your prognosis. As an example, my own oncologist sounded as if she had suddenly imbibed a liquid lunch when she called me to tell me the good news about my ALK diagnosis. Her giddiness sounded so foreign after experiencing weeks of her somber affect.
5. **Tell work:** you are going to have to tell them. It will be less painful to be transparent and rip the band aid off in one fell sweep. Being up front will foster compassion, understanding, and will prevent you from feeling that people are whispering behind your back. If you go the extra step and tell your department in person (I know, too scary), you'll gain their cooperation. Your colleagues will feel empowered to help you and your family. We all need this from time to time. We don't all have our parents around to help us. This act of colleagues helping colleagues actually builds community. This is a good thing, so try not to see it that way. One day, you'll be the one helping someone. This will require an act of faith, I know, I can't seem to get away from using that pesky word.
6. **Identify an S.O.S. champion at work:** pick your most trusted colleague. This does not have to be the chair. You might feel safer if it's not the chair. It depends on your own work situation. The S.O.S. champion can coordinate help efforts at work. Trust me, people at work want to help. They feel empowered when they can do anything to show support. And frankly, your house still needs to get cleaned, and your children still need to eat, so let them send over a house cleaning crew and food.
7. **Nurture yourself:** Treat yourself as you would your most vulnerable, sick, congenital heart disease-ridden premie from the NICU. Think about it, you already have the skillset for this work, you just need to direct it at that fabulous being staring back at you in the mirror. Prepare the essential-oil infused Epsom salt baths, learn to meditate (the Headspace App has a whole meditation for people with cancer section), immerse yourself in nature, gardening, quality time with friends, sleep, prayer, nutrition, exercise. If you have a creative hobby, lean in to it (more about that later). This is the time to dig into that sabbatical work I was referring to in #3. As for exercise, not everyone can exercise at diagnosis. Start as soon as you are healthy enough and your doctor clears you for it. Exercise is one of the lifestyle modifications that improves overall survival among patients with a variety of cancer. Many studies have demonstrated this. If I could only accomplish one lifestyle modification, I would exercise. By the way, essential-oil infused Epsom salt baths with an herbal tea worked magic for my fatigue and muscle aches from treatment. Consider starting a bath practice.

8. **Find a disease-specific support group:** You will feel greater validation in a group where you fit in. I was afraid to join a support group because I was afraid to be lumped in with a bunch of folks who smoke [my own medical bias]. Once I found ALK Positive, I found people like me: young, athletic moms who had no smoking history.
9. **Try to find a Physicians Facing Cancer support group** (e.g. Female Physicians Facing Cancer group on Facebook). Being a physician who is now suddenly a patient can be isolating. I found much help and healing connecting to other physicians with cancer.
10. **Books:** These were the 4 books that helped me the most:

Cancer as a Turning Point, by Laurence LeShan.

- Great book written by a psychologist with over 40 years experience working with oncology patients in NYC. He introduced the idea of allowing cancer to be a teacher, to allow it to become a catalyst for great change in the patient. This is something he observed in some of his patients, and he noted how this seemed to correspond with a positive response to treatment. I found the idea intriguing. This book changed my life.

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Radical Remission, by Kelly A. Turner.

- This book form the PhD thesis for Turner. She travelled the world investigating cases where patients, not expected to survive cancer actually survived and thrived. Of course everyone wants that. She identified common denominators among these patients, and these form the individual chapters in the book, which are filled with stories of patients who survived a myriad of cancers.

The Measure of Our Days, by Jerome Groopman.

- In this endearing tome, Dr. Groopman relates where he mines for hope in his own practice. He is a hematologist-oncologist at Mass General, and this book moved me with hope and inspiration. This is the book that sparked my interest in immune-oncology, and my ultimate service to my own support group by volunteering on the clinical trials committee. The lab is where hope is born.

A New Earth, by Eckhart Tolle.

- This book changed my life. I learned how to become an observer of my emotions and thoughts, rather than become swept away by them. I also learned all the ways ego can harm us. This book is very dense, and I found my background in philosophy very helpful. While not an easy read, no book has transformed my outlook quite as much as this one has. This book helped me feel less sad and despondent.

11. **Creativity:** if you have a hobby already, lean in to that. How I wished I played a musical instrument! I rediscovered my artistic talents by writing. Getting my writing published

gave me such joy. Try new things: sculpture, gardening, mountain biking, knitting, singing, learn to play the guitar . . . this will spark just joy and new life in you. We are all creative by nature, we just need to let it out and trust ourselves a little bit. Here's a "little" example. I like to paint with watercolors, but am shy to show anyone. So I designed greeting cards that I hand-painted. Huge success! I get all the joy and pleasure of painting, without worrying about the clutter of a bunch of canvases lying around, and my recipient is overjoyed and surprised by something unexpectedly hand-made.

12. **Five Wishes**: a very in-depth Advanced Directive, that is free, online, and is recognized by most states, just do it!