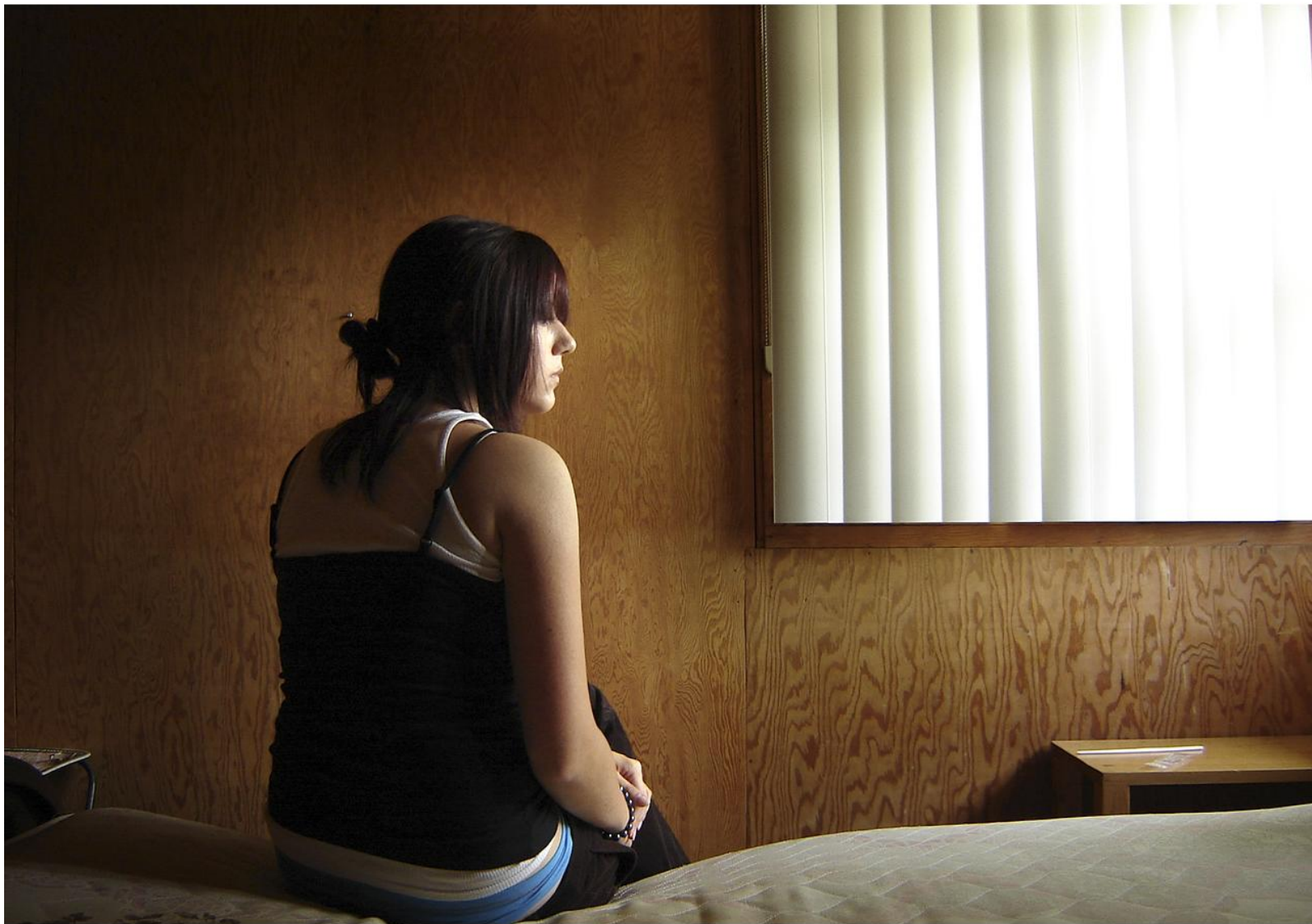


CONFRONTING CANCER:

A Teenager's Guide to Coping with a Parent's Illness



C H R I S T Y B A I N

CONFRONTING CANCER: A TEENAGER'S GUIDE TO COPING WITH A PARENT'S ILLNESS

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in loving memory of Donald R. Bain; Nov. 22 1950-Mar. 26 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION.....	ii
CHAPTER 1 : EMOTIONAL REACTIONS.....	1
Denial & Regression or Distancing.....	1
Shame.....	2
Uselessness.....	2
Guilt.....	3
CHAPTER 2 : THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING.....	4
CHAPTER 3 : HELPING VS. HINDERING.....	5
Chores.....	5
Finance.....	5
APPENDIX.....	7
CANCER TERMS.....	10



INTRODUCTION



Self-help books are not meant to be belittling. They are not meant to be hidden in a bedside drawer, or locked away in a briefcase, never to be taken out in public. Looking for help is not pathetic, nor is it something to be ashamed of. It comes from admitting that something is wrong, identifying the problem and wishing to take steps to recovery.

This self-help book is designed specifically for *you*, a teenager living at home with a parent suffering from cancer. This can be a difficult situation to live in at the best of times, and you may think that there is no remedy for your troubles.

If you've thought like this in the past, you should know that you are not alone. You should also consider the fact that you have the power to make life easier not only for yourself, but for your whole family.

CHAPTER 1 : EMOTIONAL REACTIONS



The road to acceptance is bumpy, slippery and dark. There are obstacles in the way that can be dealt with in one of two ways: in the negative situation, an event causes you to fall into a spiral of depression, and you convince yourself that everything is your fault and it will never get better. In the positive situation, you take events as they happen at face value, see the good through the suffering and come out a better person.

Unfortunately, the negative reaction is often second nature, an easy way out of severe problems. Most people perceive wallowing in their troubles to be much easier than holding their heads high and coming out on top. On our proverbial road, the only direction this melancholy thinking can lead is backwards.

Whether your parent's illness has been recently diagnosed or has been ongoing for some time, the best medicine is love, support and understanding—not just for your mother or father, but for you, too. The first few months tend to be very shocking as you adjust to your parent's new lifestyle; after the initial upset, you can take steps to deal rationally with your emotions.

❖ DENIAL & REGRESSION OR DISTANCING

When my father was first diagnosed with bowel & liver cancer in 2004, my family was strengthened rather than weakened. We knew neither how to handle it nor what would come, but we knew we could deal with it together.

What came was months and months of chemotherapy treatment, CAT scans, further and increasingly disheartening discoveries of new tumors, surgeries and years of worry and anxiety.

The year my father was diagnosed, I took the absolute wrong route down the road. I refused to talk to my friends and family. I let myself be absorbed by the pain from which I knew my father was suffering, and I became insensitive and emotionless. This was very hard on my father, mother and brother. They needed support just as much as I didn't want theirs, and in the back of my mind, I blamed my father's illness for *my* sadness.

Becoming cold and emotionless is observably not an effective way to deal with a problem. Attempting to distance yourself from your family is understandable because it

makes you feel less guilty and shameful. It can lead to spending less time with friends or being purposely rude and insensitive in order to cover up your own insecurities.

Similarly, you may feel that you now have even less in common with your peers. While they agonize over who will take them to prom, you carry a constant worry that your parent could end up in the hospital at any time. The difference is obvious.

Your friends may feel embarrassed to bring up the topic of your parent's illness or fear that you may mention it and cause discomfort. Your closest friends may also be uncomfortable with the subject, but it is important that you talk to someone about your feelings. Chatting with a peer whose family has also been changed by cancer can prove to be inspiring and enlightening.

❖ SHAME

Shame is another familiar feeling upon your parent's diagnosis. Suddenly, your mother doesn't have the energy to pick you up from school, and you constantly mooch rides from your friends. Suddenly, her hair falls out, she becomes gaunt, and you feel embarrassed by the pitying looks from strangers. You may be mortified when she burdens her friends with her story or tells strangers at the doctor's office. But remember, this is her time; be sure to support her as obstacles emerge.

Work around problems that can be easily remedied. Take alternative transit – the bus for example – to ease the load adopted by your friends' parents. Suggest, rather than insist, that she buy a fitted wig or new clothes to fit her smaller figure. Most importantly, remember that though you may be upset by the attention drawn to your parent's illness, it is comforting for her to share her experience with others, and that she, not you, is feeling the most pronounced emotional effects of her disease.

❖ USELESSNESS

The most prominent and common emotion felt in your situation is uselessness. You may feel depressed or guilty because no matter what you do, it is, in the end, not your battle to fight.

Many people think that there is no way to help, that they are simply a spare wheel. But there is something that everyone can do, which will be reiterated often throughout the following chapters—you can love.

Consider that your parent may have accepted that his health is completely in the hands of doctors and nurses, surgery and medication.

You are also unable to control these things, which often causes the feeling of uselessness. You are able to help the emotional and mental health of your parent, however, by showing undying support, helping with chores and displaying your ability to understand and care.

Physically, your parent will likely become very tired due to the chemotherapy. If you have siblings, encourage them to take on small household chores such as loading and unloading the dishwasher, washing the laundry or cleaning the bathroom. You can help make dinner, mow the lawn or shovel snow. Even seemingly miniscule tasks can be exhausting to your parent. Taking control like this displays emotional recognition as well as compassion and maturity.

❖ GUILT

Feeling guilty about your parent's illness goes hand in hand with feeling useless. You may feel that if you had just done *one thing* sooner, your parent would not have been diagnosed. You may feel terrible for being angry with your mother a day before her diagnosis, or feel guilty about yelling at your sick father.

This is a delicate situation as your parent likely wishes for things to stay the same but would still like to have his problem acknowledged. The thinking is generally along these lines: "I want you to recognize my problem, understand my problem, but treat me the same as you did before my diagnosis."

In a sense, this is impossible. There will be guilt associated with every negative action towards your parent—guilt that was never there or was very weak before your parent fell ill. Coddling and babying your parent is likewise an ineffective way of dealing with the problem; it may cause your parent to feel useless and further the emotional stress.

To combat this guiltiness, try to help where your parent seems to be struggling, and work out your own problems instead of arguing about them.

CHAPTER 2 : THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING



There are hundreds of self-help books for cancer patients. They are written so that a person coping with cancer will be able to understand what is happening to his body, why it is happening, how it will affect him and how he can face the dilemmas that come with diagnosis. If your parent does not have one of these books, it would make a thoughtful gift to show him that you are willing to talk to him and help him through his problems.

These books are usually very specific, focusing on colon cancer, breast cancer, skin cancer etc., rather than cancer in general, which is too broad not only physically but emotionally.

Thankfully, there are several, if not tens of, books covering each topic, ranging from very broad-spectrum (perhaps for a student) to intimately specific (for example, a book for a man with breast cancer.)

It is also important for *you* to understand your parent's emotions. You may be so overcome in dealing with your own problems that you fail to acknowledge the emotional hardships your parent is facing. Reading a book specific to your parent's illness will be insightful for both you and your family. These books will present information that your parents likely will not know and will detail reactions and emotions that you likely would not have noticed.

Remember that though you may legally be a child, your emotions are highly developed and mature, and your ability to understand and cope is very near that of an adult. Your parents may not want to worry you, or may think that this problem is too significant for you to recognize—explain to them that you are ready to hear what they're willing to say.

CHAPTER 3 : HELPING VS. HINDERING



To combat the feeling of uselessness, there are many effortless things that make a huge impression on your parents. Unfortunately, no matter how supportive you are, there are many actions that may end up hindering more than they help.

❖ CHORES

As previously stated, simple ways to show your parents that you are responsible and understanding could simply be taking over chores, offering to drive your siblings to sports or helping around the house.

If your parent asks you to take your little sister to the mall, don't complain. This is a menial task compared to all the things she has done for you, and it is an easy way to show that you're adaptable and helpful.

Creating a chore list with names, tasks and dates can simplify your parent's workload around the house, giving her time to rest or complete other jobs. Don't overcomplicate things by arguing about who will do which chore; instead, suggest that everyone pull a slip of paper from a jar each week that contains the necessary tasks.

❖ FINANCE

If your parent's form of cancer is a long-suffering one, he or she was likely advised by a doctor to stop working a typical, 9am-5pm job. This advice, coupled with your parent's developing feeling of exhaustion may cause some anxiety over financial matters.

Remember, it is not your responsibility, as a child, to provide for your family. Doing something drastic such as quitting school to take on a full-time job in lieu of your parent's lack of continuing income is a severe and irresponsible action.

The assumption that your parents are in their forties, or even fifties, suggests that they have been in the workforce for at least 25 years, so they likely have a good financial backing. Most families have some money invested or saved in case of such an emergency or have pensions that will aid with monetary problems.

This is not to say that you shouldn't be cautious—being more careful with your money or taking on a part-time job during the summer shows that you recognize the changing financial situation. Paying for your own endeavors also demonstrates your independence and responsibility as a maturing teenager.

There are other reasons not to worry: in Canada, under the Canada Pension Plan disability benefit, the federal government subsidizes a small percentage of your parent's past income and provides a monthly cheque, per child, to your parents.

Your dependent child under 18 years of age, or your child who is between 18 and 25 and who is attending school full time, can receive \$200.47 a month in 2006 if you are approved for a disability benefit. Your child can only receive a benefit if at least one parent is receiving a CPP disability benefit.

This text, taken from the Canada Pension Plan's website, pertains only to citizens with disabilities who have paid into the plan for at least four years prior to their diagnosis, are under 65 years of age and were forced to quit their jobs because of their condition.

Ultimately, it is practically impossible for you to provide income for your entire family. Taking control of your *own* situation, however, is a very real possibility. If you feel you have enough time between school and extracurricular activities, take on a part-time job that will provide you with some extra cash—this way, you can still go out on the weekends without feeling guilty about asking your parents for money.

TO CLOSE...

It is your decision how you choose to react to certain events and hardships. This guide proves that you are not alone in your situation—many people respond exactly the same way as you do to all sorts of problems.

Remember that you have friends and family who are always willing to lend an ear when you are upset or simply provide a shoulder to cry on. Displaying any of the emotions dealt with above does not make you weak or pathetic; it shows that you have an excellent understanding of your own feelings and the feelings of others.

If you feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk to you parents, seek out a school therapist or even the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

Feel free to email me at crossyourmind@gmail.com if you have any comments or concerns, or just to discuss your situation.

APPENDIX



RIGHT BRAIN VS. LEFT BRAIN THINKING

The right/left brain theory of the structure and functions of the mind suggests that the two different sides of the brain control two different "ways" of thinking.

Typically, a person who predominantly uses the left side of his brain will be inclined to think more logically and analytically than a person who thinks mostly with the right side of the brain.

The type of person who thinks principally with her right brain tends to be more emotional and intuitive. This is not to say that a person falling into the left-brain category is unable to think holistically; simply, most people have strength in one category over the other.

It is important to understand how your brain will react to an emotional crisis because this process is, to a small extent, out of your control.

Firstly, to determine whether you are a left-brain thinker or a right-brain thinker, answer the following emotional and analytical-based questions.

- 1.) **Are you a very organized person?**
 - a. **Yes**
 - b. **No**

- 2.) **Are you better at remembering people by faces or by names?**
 - a. **Names**
 - b. **Faces**

- 3.) **When taking a test, which do you prefer?**
 - a. **Objective questions (multiple choice, true/false)**
 - b. **Subjective questions (discussion, short answer)**

- 4.) **When writing, which do you prefer?**
 - a. **Non-fiction**
 - b. **Fiction**

Now, these questions are pretty obvious, and you likely observed that an **a.** answer means that you are a left-brain thinker, and a **b.** answer means that you tend to think with your right brain.

These questions are very over-simplified, but the general theory can be seen easily: if you are more adept at thinking analytically, you will process emotions differently than someone who thinks creatively/intuitively.

❖ LEFT BRAIN

If you determined that you are a left-brain thinker, you likely reacted **rationally** to the news about your parent's illness. Being left-brained does not exclude you from being emotional; however, it is likely that you were more interested in facts (how long, why, what caused it?) rather than emotions (are you okay, would you like to talk to me about it?).

Although you might imagine that being analytical would cause you to be more detached or unfriendly, this is not the case.

Most people who feel with their left-brain are better at finding the causes to emotional problems and devising logical ways to solve them. Right-brained people tend to be over-sympathetic, which can be a burden to your parent.

As a left-brained thinker, you must take caution, as mentioned above, not to seem distant purely because you may not understand your parent's emotions. If you are not able to make your affection and understanding clear through dialogue, something as simple as a 'get well' card can seriously improve your parent's mood.

Left-brained thinkers have another disadvantage: they are less able to sense emotions. Because of this, your parent may feel ignored by your lack of response to what she believes is a blatant and obvious emotion.

There are certain signs that people emit: when they are angry, they may speak curtly and avoid eye contact; when they are sad, they are likely to be subdued and may speak negatively; when they are anxious, they may complain of nausea or develop a nervous habit such as nail biting.

Signs like these are often hard to miss, are dismissed as odd behaviour or in the case of nausea, a side effect of the chemotherapy.

As a left-brained thinker, encourage your parent to keep a journal of her moods and feelings so that she will not assume that her problems are going unnoticed. Showing that you recognize her stress and admitting that you find it difficult to sympathize is the first step to better communication.

❖ **RIGHT BRAIN**

As stated in the theory above, right-brained thinkers are understood to be more intuitive, emotionally inclined and creative. There are obvious benefits, in your particular situation, of being right-brain dominant: you are able to sense emotions easily; you can devise thoughtful ways of expressing your feelings; you can easily identify methods of reassuring or cheering up your parent.

Being able to sense someone's emotions is an enviable trait. Many people find it difficult to differentiate between, for example, anger and annoyance, sadness and anxiety, but you likely have little problem in telling the difference. This can be used to your advantage because you are able to tell when broaching a subject may be inappropriate or unwanted.

Luckily, being right-brain dominant also causes you to be more eloquent in your ability to communicate with others and, in turn, gauge their reactions.

Try going back over the Emotional Reactions chapter with this knowledge. For each emotion, compare how you actually responded with how your 'other brain' would react. If you were identified as right-brained, try to interpret the information from a left-brained point of view and vice-versa.

Having an open mind when it comes to feelings is the strongest way to overcome emotional anxieties.

CANCER TERMS



These are words that you likely either have heard or will hear while your parent is sick.

Benign tumour - a swelling or growth that is not cancerous and does not spread from one part of the body to another.

Biopsy - the removal, for diagnostic study, of a piece of tissue from a living body.

Blood count - the number of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in a sample of blood.

Chemotherapy - the treatment of disease by means of chemicals that have a specific toxic effect upon the disease-producing microorganisms or destroy cancerous tissue.

CT Scan - an x-ray used to obtain image data from different angles to show a cross-section of body tissues and organs.

Malignant tumour - a tumor made up of cancer cells of the type that can spread to other parts of the body.

Metastasize - to spread to other parts of the body by way of the blood or lymphatic vessels or membranous surfaces.

Oncology - the study of cancer.

Placebo - an inert substance often used in clinical trials for comparison.

Port-a-Cath® - a type of device, planted under the skin, for intravenous access in patients who require frequent or continuous administration of intravenous substances (typically chemotherapy).

Prognosis - the projected outcome of a disease; life expectancy.

Radiotherapy - treatment of disease with radiation, especially by selective irradiation with x-rays or other ionizing radiation and by ingestion of radioisotopes.

Remission - a temporary or permanent subsidence of manifestations of a disease.

White blood cells - general term for a variety of cells responsible for fighting invading germs, infection, and allergy-causing agents.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Bain was born in North York, Ontario, in April 1989. After her adoption, she moved to Mississauga with her adoptive mother, father and brother, where she has lived ever since.

Her parents, Joanne and Don (who passed away in March 2007), have both been affected by cancer (skin and colorectal, respectively), which prompted Christy's interest in the subject of the emotional ramifications of living with a disease.

Christy is currently a Grade 12 student at The Woodlands School, where she is pursuing her interests in business, journalism and international languages.

Her extra-curricular interests include, but are not limited to, martial arts, languages, reading, graphic design, playing guitar, photography and writing.