

Cancer Limbo – A New Year’s Party Game?

Life with Cancer

A New Year is coming. It should be a time of celebration, new beginnings, resolutions and joy. So you’re expecting a lecture on inspiration, hope, the beauty of life, right?

The trouble is, New Year is a lot like finishing chemo. You look forward to it for months but, when it finally comes, it’s a huge anti-climax. At New Year, all the present giving is over, the family goes away, and you’re expected to still be excited. In the same way, after chemo, your doctor waves you on your way, treatment stops and you feel lost and alone. Even worse, you’re expected to celebrate your new beginnings, even though your new beginnings are even scarier than having cancer. It’s called Limbo. And no, it’s not that New Year’s Eve party game. It’s where cancer patients go after treatment.



For months you’ve been coddled and cooed over by doctors and nurses, attentively listening to your every ache and pain, on standby 24 hours a day in case of that dreaded 101.5-deg F fever. You’ve been prodded, pricked, sent for blood tests and CAT scans, shot with radiation beams, or had some mysterious fluid pumped through your veins to seek out and destroy cancer cells.

Then, if you’re really lucky, here it comes: “You don’t need any more treatment. You’re in remission!” “Yes! I made it. I want to jump for joy. I want to climb every mountain and sing Edelweiss, I want to.... Oh, hang on, I can’t.” Why? Because what I actually feel is a total anti-climax. I should feel really happy, but I don’t. WHAT’S WRONG WITH ME!!!

You are, my fellow cancer survivor, in limbo. You finally realize it when the next thing the doctor says is: “Come back and see me in 3 months.” What! But I’ve practically been living here for the last 6. Don’t you love me anymore? Aren’t I your favorite patient anymore? What happened?

Fact is he or she doesn’t need to see like before. Your cancer’s gone. But what do I do? No chemo goals to reach. No blood test results to pore over. No nurse to call when I feel terrible. Help!

I liken it to being pushed out to sea on a boat, all alone. No crew, no fellow passengers, just you, the wind and the horizon. And I can tell you it’s very, very scary. Thoughts start to whirl in your head. Why don’t I feel “normal”? Will I ever feel “normal” again? What does the future

hold? Will my cancer come back? Oh no, I'm already starting to worry about that check-up that's 3 months away.

It's a grieving process: loneliness, disbelief, anger, depression. Then, hopefully, you find some kind of balance, a new "normal." How long does it take? Maybe a couple of months, maybe a year, maybe even longer. Support groups help. But most of us, at some point, find our new normal in limbo.

It may not be as much fun as gyrating your body under a pole on a sunset beach, but, as with the New Year, it is a new beginning and you can learn to embrace it.

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