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**STAGE IV SURVIVOR
2020 FIGHT CRC AMBASSADOR**



PRO TIP:

When we can embrace both the positive and negative sides of our feelings, embracing the weight of the negative becomes more bearable.

Q As someone facing cancer, I'm often told to "think positively," but I can't. It's hard to be optimistic. How can I deal with my negative emotions?

A It's common to hear "stay positive" when you face cancer. I believe it's important to think positively, but my personal and professional experiences have taught me that embracing the negative can also be a good thing. There is positivity to be found in negativity. If we don't let ourselves experience struggles, they build up and become more difficult to manage. It's okay to feel negative and have bad moments, bad days, and even bad weeks.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting you dwell on the negative. Research shows negative thinking is prone to spur on more negative thinking. This can create a difficult spiral where negative thinking leads to negative feelings and negative behaviors that tend to reinforce the latter. But, it's important to remember that it's okay to feel down.

It's okay to feel negative. It's okay to feel sad. It's okay to feel like nothing in life makes sense anymore.

But, instead of focusing on the negative feelings, try and accept the negative and give yourself permission to grieve the pain.

3 Three tips to staying positive

As you handle and accept negative feelings, it will allow the positive feelings to break in. Here are a few practical tips on how that happens:

1 DO SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

There's no getting around it—cancer is scary. Even though I've been "no evidence of disease" for five years, triggers still pull up unwanted emotional hurts, pains, and fears that make remaining positive difficult, even as a "hardwired optimist," as my friends call me. When this occurs, I try to think about something positive to take my mind off of the negative thoughts. This can include listening to my favorite jazz album and focusing on each note that is played. Other times, it means looking at pictures of my family and friends and recalling the positive feelings I experienced in those moments.

2 DO SOMETHING YOU'RE GOOD AT...NO MATTER HOW SMALL

Sometimes this is enough to break patterns of negative thinking. It can help you get back on track to thinking positively. When struggling with negative thinking, the goal isn't accomplishing something. The goal is simply trying and doing something. Making attempts can bring similar benefits to actually achieving goals, even if you don't accomplish as much as you hope.

Years ago, a client of mine struggled with depression. For a period of time, the biggest goal he could hope for was to make the bed each day. When he didn't feel like getting out of bed, he could at least pull up the sheets

and toss the pillows next to the headboard. This may have seemed small, but it was actually huge. It gave him momentum, which over time built up, and ultimately led him to find the strength to seek counseling.

3 REPEAT STEPS 1 AND 2, AND BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF

If doing something small didn't help, give yourself time and try again. It might take numerous attempts and repetition for things to work. Maybe you couldn't muster up enough energy to go for a walk. Rather than coming down hard on yourself, show yourself compassion and try something else like talking with a friend. If a conversation feels too daunting, send a short text.

If you feel like you are in a slump or deep sadness for several weeks, it's time to talk to a healthcare or mental health professional.

Through my work as a disaster researcher, I've seen how positivity fosters resilience. As a psychologist, I have seen the power of positivity amidst adversity. Personally, positivity has helped me navigate surviving Hurricane Katrina, as well as stage IV colorectal cancer. It's helping me now through cancer survivorship.

It's important to acknowledge your whole story—the good, beautiful, and joyful—but also the negative, bad, messy, and ugly.