

Here For Now



Living Well
with Cancer
Through
Mindfulness

Elana Rosenbaum

Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn

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Living Well with Cancer
Through Mindfulness

Elana Rosenbaum, MS, LICSW



*This book is dedicated to my husband David,
who held my hand and comforted me with his presence
when I was ill and keeps my spirit alive and joyous
through all my days.*

IN APPRECIATION

To all who pray for me, love me, and sustain me, thank you.
I am filled with gratitude.

In appreciation,
May these blessings be received:

*May the one who was a source of blessing for our ancestors bring the
blessings of healing upon those who we name in our hearts —
a healing of body and a healing of spirit.*

*May those in whose care they are entrusted be gifted with wisdom
and skill in their care.*

*May family and friends who surround them be gifted with love and
openness, strength and trust in their care.*

May we all be blessed.

May we all be well.

May we all live in love and freedom.

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May we all be well.

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FOREWORD

There was a moment standing at the foot of Elana's bed in the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit gazing down on her bald head and feeling the labored breathing of the pneumonia she had contracted after her stem cell treatment, when I thought we might actually lose her that very day. Apparently a lot of other people, including some of the staff on the Unit, thought so too. But Elana did not die. She came back from what looked, from the outside, to be death's very door. Her life force just hung on, against all odds, and she somehow hung in with it.

It didn't surprise those of us who knew her . . . Elana Rosenbaum "defines" commitment, resolve, determination, and stubborn perseverance. In my experience of it, having worked closely together in the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness at the UMass Medical Center for close to twenty years, that is how she approaches everything; her work, her meditation practice, her life. What it feels like ultimately, radiating out of her and all around her, is love. You can feel it in these pages, in which she shares with us her wild ride, and even more importantly, her dharma energies and wisdom. One testament to her energies and wisdom is that, in the months following her discharge from the Transplant Unit, a good number of the staff signed up to take the Stress Reduction Program, having witnessed something in her that comes in large measure out of her meditation practice, and wanting to acquire it for themselves

and perhaps as an aid for other patients facing the same rock wall of being brought to death's door in order to save them.

Elana embodies in herself everything she teaches others, for the most part now cancer patients. Her authority, her authenticity, and her personal commitment entrain just about everyone into the beauty already to be found in their own lives, often obscured by the shadow of their disease, and all the ghosts of fear and pain and turmoil associated with it.

You have to know Elana to really appreciate her luminosity, her effervescence, and her unbridled enthusiasm for life. She radiates the determination and, strange to say, the innocence and purity of the *Little Engine That Could* like nobody else I have ever met. Now, in these pages, you have a priceless opportunity to get to know her and share in her remarkable energies. You have here the priceless opportunity to explore the power of mindfulness in the service of coming to terms with things as they actually are — a good way to think of healing — and above all, you have the priceless opportunity to come to know yourself, intimately, in ways that may make all the difference. As the poet, Kabir, put it, “Fantastic! Don’t let a chance like this go by!”

Jon Kabat-Zinn
January 2005

INTRODUCTION

“The present moment is a precious moment.” I say this over and over to the patients I see as a psychotherapist and in the mindfulness-based stress reduction classes I’ve been teaching for the last twenty years. I also repeat it to myself. It’s a reminder, a wake-up call to pay attention and be present, here, now, in this moment, with *whatever* is happening, without judgment. This helps me stay current and not get lost in what is beyond my ability to change.

Reminding myself to stay awake and be present has been a guiding principle in my life, at work, and at home, through happy times and sad. I’ve been lucky. This practice of meditation has been part of my life for almost thirty years and I’ve had the good fortune to use it as part of my work since 1984. At that time I began teaching in the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Program, which was the first mind/body program in the nation, founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. Over 16,000 people have gone through this program and been helped in coping with emotional and physical disorders such as anxiety, headaches, cancer, AIDS, heart disease, gastro-intestinal disorders, psoriasis, fibromyalgia, pain, and stress-related symptoms. In the spring of 1995, when I was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, I became one of them. Staying present and paying attention *without judgment* was vital if I didn’t want to get lost and swallowed up by self-pity or

despair. It became imperative that I focus on what I did have control over-my attitude-in order to maintain a sense of well-being.

“There’s more right with you than wrong,” I’d tell my classes, “even in the face of a life-threatening illness.” But acting on this belief and staying happy requires effort. My diagnosis forced me to confront habits that kept me from being well. It forced me to pay attention and really notice what helped me stay well and what I needed to let go or change. Caring for myself properly meant I *really had to listen to my body and nurture myself, mind and body*. I needed to remind myself to come back to this moment again and again. I needed to maintain an open, steady heart and forgive myself if I strayed. I also needed to be able to accept support. My intention and commitment NOT to SUFFER became paramount in my ability to cope with the rapidity of change that the diagnosis of cancer wrought in my life.

“May I be safe and protected. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.” These are words of a loving-kindness meditation that I learned from Sharon Salzberg at the Insight Meditation Society where I went for meditation retreats. I’d repeat these words to myself as I’d walk along, as I sat in waiting rooms, as I lay in bed receiving chemotherapy and throughout my daily activities. When I noticed my mind drifting I’d wake myself up by focusing on a sound in the room or by noticing the in and out movement of breath in my body. I used my meditation practice to help me connect to the sources of strength and support within and around me.

Here for Now began its life as a journal when I was first diagnosed. It included poems, illustrations and doodles that arose spontaneously as I worked to maintain my equanimity. I wrote to sort out my feelings and restore a sense of calm and quiet to the home inside of me. Sometimes the pictures reflected silent screams of anguish or wild lows of frustration so deeply embedded in mind and body that only color and form could represent them. Writing and drawing allowed my internal states to come out and be released. As I recovered, I continued to keep a record of my struggles to maintain a sense of perspective and balance. I wanted to use my experience and learn from it. I hoped to be able to use it to help others if they too became ill or challenged in maintaining a sense of health and wellness.

I was determined not to suffer. I did my best not to resist how I felt, even in the face of frequent tests and procedures, chemotherapy and a subsequent stem cell transplant. Yet when I felt most depleted and at greatest risk I also felt most complete, suffused with love, peace and calm. Only as I began to become stronger and able to do more did I become less content, my wanting mind restless and impatient with the slowness of my recovery. Now that I had survived it seemed that my challenge to stay well and be happy was harder than ever.

I love the phrase from the I Ching that says perseverance furthers, but during the period of my recovery I often identified with the runners in the Boston marathon right after Heartbreak Hill. I used to watch the marathon with my sister-in-law, Judi. Our position was beyond Heartbreak Hill but still miles before the finish line. As Anna, my niece, less than a year old, slept contentedly beside us in her baby carriage, Judi and I stood in the cold, bundled up, clapping and shouting to encourage the runners on. It was obvious that many were tired but they kept on, some limping, some walking, others going at a steady pace, powered by training, will, effort and their dream of completing this famous race. We supported them, yelling at the top of our lungs as they approached, "You can do it, Go! Only a little more. Go! You can make it."

As I kept on doing my best to keep my spirits up through a series of blood transfusions, anemia, and isolation following my transplant, I was forced to confront physical limitations. It became clear that the more I could let go and accept these limitations the better I felt and the freer I became. The more I lived in the present moment as it was, rather than what I wished it would be, the happier I felt.

In my MBSR classes I emphasized the importance of living fully, no matter what is happening, and the need to put oneself into whatever one is doing all the way. My models were *The Little Engine that Could* and Dr. Seuss's characters in *Oh, The Places You'll Go*. Seuss says, "Step with care and great tact and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act."

Nothing stays the same, why should I? When I did return to work I no longer felt like the person I had known for over fifty years, the me that could take life for granted. This caused its own stress. I

wanted every moment to be important and precious but I couldn't sustain the attentional focus that I was demanding of myself. I forgot that every moment is precious, regardless of what it holds and that it would take some time and flexibility to re-assess my priorities and find a new balance.

It's now been nine years since my transplant. My brother and his family have moved away, but I still go to the Boston marathon. Now as I stand there I find myself with tears in my eyes. I identify with the runners. As they pass I appreciate their attitude and spirit. I see how hard they are working. I know the importance of intention, dedication, practice, and putting your whole self into whatever you choose to do. Now when I work with cancer patients, newly diagnosed and fearful about the outcome of chemotherapy, I am their coach, rooting for them and their endurance of spirit and hope.

You can do it. Yes, you can.

As I am allowed to age and be here, gratitude fills me. When I lead a retreat or work with cancer patients teaching them meditation, whether I am sitting with them in my office or on the transplant unit at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute or at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, I still quote the gatta, a poem, by Thich Nhat Hahn:

*Breathing in I calm,
Breathing out I smile.
Dwelling in the Present Moment
It is a precious moment.*

We are here and alive now. Rest in the moment and be free of sorrow. We can be happy and live with safety, ease and well-being. This moment we have choices. Next moment, who knows?

Here for Now is about living well and facing life's challenges with strength, and grace, an open heart, a clear mind and a steadiness of purpose. The guided meditations and exercises come directly from my own experience. You may use them at any time, and in any order.

We are all unique and wonderful. In facing ourselves with compassion and opening to what is true, we become free. My goal in writing this book and sharing my journey is to facilitate a fullness of being that says, “Yes” to love and grief, happiness and sorrow, adventure and tedium, “Yes” to mistakes, and “Yes,” to continued learning. Living in this way requires commitment, hard work, and effort . . . and faith in the possibility of happiness and freedom now.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Here for Now combines narrative with meditations and exercises. The story is written in chronological order and can be read straight through. While reading you may pause at any time and bring awareness to any thoughts, sensations or feelings that are evoked. Feel free to doodle, jot down reflections or stop and become aware of your breath. The meditations and exercises can be done at any time, either after each chapter or later. You can use them repeatedly. You may want to experiment, experiencing each one for a period of time before you settle on one to use on a regular basis. Choose what resonates with you best. Remember to be patient and kind to yourself allowing the moment to unfold without striving to make something happen. Be as free of expectations as possible so you can explore and discover each moment anew, witnessing what arises without judgment.

It is recommended that all meditations be done in a quiet and protected environment where you practice for a set period of time without interruption. These meditations are also available on a CD that can be ordered or you can have someone read them to you or record them yourself to guide you until you are familiar with them. The more you use the meditations the greater benefit you will receive. Trust your own inner wisdom and let it be your guide. Your intention and commitment to this process is more important than achieving a particular state.

THE CONSENT FORM

Before people were allowed to participate in the Stress Reduction Program they had to commit themselves to participating fully in the program which meant attending a weekly two-and-a half hour session that met for eight weeks as well as an all day session held on a weekend after the sixth class. They also needed to agree to do their homework which consisted of a forty-five minute daily meditation alternating between a body scan meditation, yoga, or awareness of breathing. If they said, “Yes, I’m willing to do this,” they then signed a consent form that said “. . .the risks, benefits and possible side effects of the program have been explained to me fully.”

As I’d hand out the form I’d think, “Risks? What risks? You’re being offered an opportunity to practice meditation. You have eight weeks of support and help in being with yourself and taking time to nurture yourself. You’ll be in a community of like-minded people all of whom are dedicated to being well. You go at your own pace. You are responsible for yourself. The yoga we do is a series of very gentle stretches. You can be as verbally participatory as you are comfortable being. There’s nothing you have to do except take the time to stop and inquire, with awareness and kindness, into the present moment.”

Here’s what I’ve discovered about them:

RISKS

You can get to know yourself better; insight can come without warning

You might experience feelings of joy

You might experience feelings of pain

You might notice ways in which you are not balanced

Change. You could change

Change requires adjustments to regain a sense of balance

Old memories could return

You’ll probably have to readjust your schedule to do the homework

You’ll have to let some things go

Relationships might be experienced differently both with
yourself and others
You'll be facing the unknown-yourself
You might not like what you discover
You will be challenged
Challenge requires effort
You will have to take responsibility for yourself and your
actions

BENEFITS

Less mental anguish
A greater sense of well-being
Freedom
Happiness, joy, peace
A greater sense of balance in your life
Mindfulness: Clear seeing and understanding
A quieter mind
A sense of wholeness, vastness, space, connection
Wisdom

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

New understanding
A more expansive perspective
Wonder fullness

Life is filled with risks, benefits and side effects. I've signed the consent form. How about you?

EXERCISE: THE CONSENT FORM

My Intention/Goals are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now, ask yourself if you are willing to make a commitment to yourself to work towards your goals mindfully with love and compassion. If the answer is “yes” you may sign below.

Your intention to be well, and pay attention mindfully to whatever arises with love and care will powerfully affect the outcome of your goals.

I, _____
commit myself to actively engage in the practice of mindfulness for
_____ and work toward
(Fill in length of time you are willing to give it a chance.)
my goals to the best of my efforts.

Signed _____

A GUIDED MEDITATION

TO BEGIN, ASSUME A POSITION that supports your ability to be awake and alert as well as comfortable. Gently close your eyes and bring awareness to sound. Let yourself receive what you are hearing, and notice what comes without striving to make something happen. You may hear sounds in the room or sounds outside the room, or no sounds at all. Simply listen and notice how the sounds you hear change from moment to moment.

When you feel ready you can let your attention shift to your breathing. If you like, you can put your hands on your belly and feel it as it rises with the in-breath and falls with the out-breath. Really feel each breath as it enters and leaves the body. Notice its rhythm and explore its length and depth, observing how it changes in response to a thought or feeling. Notice the way you are breathing, through your mouth or the nose, or maybe a little of both. There may be a tendency to want to change how you are breathing, but we are practicing allowing ourselves to accept whatever is happening and noticing that moment by moment things change. The breath changes and you change. Nothing stays the same, yet there is constancy. The breath reminds us that we are here and alive: let it be your anchor to the present moment.

If you like, as you breathe in, knowing you're breathing in, you can imagine that you're breathing in health and vitality. On the out breath, knowing you're breathing out, you can imagine you're releasing toxins, along with any worries or fears that you'd like to let go. Notice all you can about the breath, staying with it as it comes in and as it goes out.

If physical sensations are strong, they will capture your attention; and you can breathe with them, sending care and compassion to the sensation as you notice it. Inhale, breathing in oxygen and nutrients and sending them to any part of the body that needs them, especially to any areas that are

particularly sensitive. Breathe out, releasing any tension or tightness that you may notice. Breathe with the sensation, softening into it and noticing how it changes, calming yourself as you enter into it with your breath.

Observe what arises, with kindness, without judging any reactions you may be experiencing and letting each moment be a new one to enter afresh.

If you become aware that you are thinking, you can label it, “thought” and gently but firmly return your attention to the breath. It is normal for your mind to wander. Simply notice what captures your attention and bring it back. If it’s helpful you can imagine that you’re in a glass-bottom boat, observing fish as they swim through the water, or observing clouds moving through a vast sky on a clear day.

Be in harmony with each breath, each moment, and know that in giving yourself this time to develop awareness and a steadiness of attention you are nourishing spirit, head and heart. Let it be an adventure, and in the silence and the stillness that comes with practice you’ll discover wonders here for you, now.