The Cancer Wake Up Call: 8 Lessons that Enhanced My Life

Editor's Note: This is part of a series of Patient Advocate Guest Columns and Podcasts, launched as a forum for patient advocates to address a topic, issue, or trend within the cancer community through Cancer.Net, the patient information website of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

The Cancer Wake Up Call: 8 Lessons that Enhanced My Life

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The following article was taken from a speech that Steven gave at an American Cancer Society Relay for Life event at Penn State University on April 9, 2010.

It was 9:00 AM on April 13, 2009. I was healthy. Or so I thought. By lunchtime I was not healthy. The roller coaster of life was about to take some major turns.

I was diagnosed with testicular cancer. The doctor gave me an interesting perspective when he said, ?If you have to have cancer, testicular cancer is a good one to have. It is virtually 100% curable.?

On one hand, I felt extremely fortunate and relieved of the prognosis. However, on the other hand, I was shocked. I had the BIG ?C.? Several thoughts ran through my head:

?Oh my God! This can't be happening to me.?
?I never get sick.?
?No one in my family has had it.?
?Why me??

Then I felt guilty for feeling sorry for myself. I tried to ?motivational speak? myself into sucking it up and dealing with it.

Let's fast forward to the end of this story. I was fortunate. My doctors caught it early. I had an operation. I went through nine weeks of chemotherapy treatment. And as of today - just as my doctor predicted - I have a clean bill of health. While the BIG ?C? is gone, I have learned invaluable lessons that will stay with me forever.

Truth be told, before April 13, 2009, I lived like the Teflon Man. I had heard of many tough situations - health challenges, people passing, tough breakups, financial worries, and more - and thought, *?Wow. That situation is so awful and so challenging. I feel so sad for that person.?* Then, after some time, I wouldn't think too much about the situation and would continue on with my life.

On April 13, 2009 the Teflon came off, and what stuck changed my life. I have outlined the lessons I learned from my experience. I truly hope these lessons will help you as you deal with life's challenges.

Lesson 1: The worst lies you ever tell are the lies you tell yourself.
As I reflect on my experiences, it took that single day in April for me to shed the Teflon and really be honest with myself.

Yes, I am the president of my own company, an author of three books, and a professional speaker with over 16 years of experience teaching people to use honest communication. Yet, as embarrassing as this is to admit, I had not been honest with myself. I had been wasting time - years - thinking I needed to pay my dues before I could take the time to sit back and enjoy my life. I thought I could compensate for the time I was giving up. In other words, I thought that one day, it would all pay off. I always thought:

?One day, I will spend more time with my loved ones.?
?One day, I will start a family.?
?One day, I will travel around the world.?

It was as if someone were keeping a ledger on my life. If I made enough deposits I could always cash it in later and reap the rewards of the other aspects of my life that I was missing. Honestly, I was living as if time was in endless supply even though I knew the fragility of health and life. I

realized that I just did not get it.

Although the doctor did say my prognosis was virtually 100% curable, I could not help but think:

?What if that one day of pay off never comes??
?What if it's too late for my â€˜I will do it later' mentality??
?What if those days to make good never come??

Before my diagnosis, I was living as if others would be around when I was ready to enjoy them or when I fulfilled the goals I was working towards. I felt silly and selfish for thinking this. After all, if I could have something like the BIG ?C,? others could have a lot worse. And the sad truth was, at least in some respects, it actually was too late. Some people were gone. It was too late to enjoy them. I missed the opportunity. Friends have moved on and were gone. My grandparents and several relatives were gone. Vanished. Done.

Do not wait until tomorrow to start living your life. Make that one day be TODAY!

Lesson 2: Be responsible for what you say.
I would like to say that everything that came out of my mouth during this time was positive. But, alas, that would not be true. I made many mistakes in handling this situation. For example, after realizing the number of doctor visits and potential issues that I might have to deal with, I made a flip, insensitive remark to a friend over the phone: ?Maybe I will just get hit by a bus. And then I won't have to deal with all of this.?

I hung up the phone only to hear my girlfriend - now fiancÃ©e - start crying in the next room and say, ?I don't want anything to happen to you.? Ugh! Note to self: Do not be selfish. Be responsible for what you say.

Lesson 3: In the absence of data, people make things up.
I knew if I withheld information about my cancer to my family and friends, they might make things up and would probably worry more. I decided to be as open as possible so they would be less likely to fill in the gaps inaccurately.

I used this principle on myself. I realized that the Internet can be a great source of information. I also realized that it can be a source of misinformation and misinterpretation. When I did not know something, I stopped the speculation, guessing, and assumptions. Instead, I searched for someone ?in the know? who could answer my questions.

Lesson 4: When people are afraid, they say and do silly things.
Chances are, when bad things happen, people do not know what to say. So they often just do not say anything. At first I was hurt. Then I realized there were times in my life that I had done the exact same thing to other people.

Others did say things, but what they said did not always come out exactly right. For example, some people said I did not take care of myself or I worked too hard. In essence, they were saying that somehow I brought this on myself. I was not upset by this. I realized they were trying to rationalize how they could prevent this from happening to themselves. They were just afraid.

Some reacted to my situation by expressing their own worries or sharing cancer horror stories they had heard. Others launched into ?fix it? mode and started to lecture me on what I needed to do and how to eat better. Instead of wishing the situation were different, I took control of these conversations and simply responded with, ?I understand.? Then I redirected the conversation. I changed the topic using questions to turn to something more positive. This way, I got the value of their contribution without having to dwell on the situation.

I realized that there are many people who are alone and have no one in their lives. I was very fortunate that I had people in my life that cared about me, even if they did say silly things.

Lesson 5: Ask for what you want. People cannot read your mind.
People would inevitably ask me, ?Is there anything I can do?? Most people are not honest with their answer and say, ?Nothing.? I chose a different path. When people asked me that question, I was prepared and honest with my response. For example, I asked people to call and comfort my parents. I wanted to help reduce their stress and worry. How could people have known what I wanted if I was not honest with them? People are not mind readers. Be honest and clearly state your requests or desires.

Lesson 6: Besides the ?official? patient, there are others who are affected by this disease, and they often go untreated.
As the patient, I was at the center of things. However, there were other patients - my loved ones. As I learned, family and friends often feel helpless. For the most part, all they can do is watch, pray, and hope things turn out well. To make matters worse, they often store their emotions in an effort to stay strong. Here's the irony: there is great patient care, but not enough care for the unofficial patients - the loved ones.

Lesson 7: Your perspective dictates your attitude.
Most of my doctors and nurses had great attitudes despite how sick and close to death some of the patients were. How could that be? I asked about this and learned that it was because they wanted to make a difference. The doctors and nurses were in an environment that was gloomy, but they chose to look at it as an opportunity to contribute.

As I received chemotherapy, I met patients - patients who were going to be fine, patients who were not sure, and patients whose end was inevitable. I knew my treatment was short and the outcome was not in doubt. This helped me keep perspective and be appreciative of how lucky I was. My grandfather's words rang true, ?Things can always be worse.? I received a heavy and hopefully life-altering dose of medicine - keep the right perspective and appreciate life.

Lesson 8: You do not always have control over what happens to you, but you do have control of how you respond.
I realized I did not have control over this situation. It was what it was. I was 100% responsible for gleaning the value from my experience. I was brutally honest with myself. I became a lot closer to the people I should have been closer to all along. I became more spiritually connected. I appreciate my life, the people around me, and the work that I do in more ways and dimensions than ever before. My Teflon shield is gone. My experience has helped me move from living ?One day I willâ€¦? to deciding that the ?One day is today.?

As I half-jokingly and half-seriously said to a friend, ?OK! If someone was trying to get my attention, they got it!?

About the Author
Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, team performance, leadership, and change management. He has worked with numerous Fortune 500 organizations to increase revenue and drive profit, as well as with many governmental agencies to better allocate resources and taxpayer dollars. Thousands credit Gaffney's seminars, media appearances, books, and products with making immediate and lasting changes in both their organizations and personal lives. He is also the author of two groundbreaking books, *Just Be Honest* and *Honesty Works*, and the co-author of *Honesty Sells.*

To view Steven's Video Diary, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn9YEiBeZSc [1]

For additional information, visit www.StevenGaffney.com [2].

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Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn9YEiBeZSc
[2] http://www.stevengaffney.com/
[3] mailto:patientadvocates@asco.org