

# You Found Out You Have Cancer

## HERE'S HOW NOT TO PANIC

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**W**hen I first got the call from the radiologist telling me that the lump in my left breast was malignant in 2023, I panicked.

### *A Natural Response*

When you're told you have cancer, fear roars to life in your brain. It's a completely natural response. Cancer is trying to kill you, so it's really no different than a hungry bear who's come galloping into your campsite. Of course, the adrenaline will kick in. Fear, after all, is what has kept our species alive for thousands of years. When our ancient ancestors faced vicious predators, it was fear that got the adrenaline going, so they could fight or flee.

Of course we should listen to fear sometimes, because fear can help keep us alive. But when fear takes over every waking moment, leading to a state of perpetual stress about everything, then we can become paralyzed with indecision, our brains foggy with anxiety.

### *The Adrenal Response*

Jonathan Abramowitz, a psychology professor and fear researcher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said fear kicks off a chemical reaction in our bodies that's part of the fight or flight response. That means we breathe heavier and we get ready to fight or flee. But, when we can't do either—like say, in an oncologist's office—then sometimes we freeze, get irritable, or become angry. Or sometimes we bite the head off the scheduling nurse who can't get us in for that diagnostic MRI right away.

Fear doesn't help us in these situations. Fear can actually make our minds cloudy and lead to poor decisions.

That's why the Navy SEALs train to master fear.

### *Taking on Fear Like a Navy SEAL*

You might be surprised to know that Navy SEALs also feel afraid. I think we often see them as fearless heroes bounding into danger without a second thought, but they're human and they feel fear.

You can't be brave without being afraid first. It's what a lot of us forget when we think about courage. Brave people aren't so different from anyone else. They feel the same fear. They just do the scary things anyway.

SEALs manage their fear by controlling their breathing to help regain control of their bodies and their minds.

That means exhaling for five seconds, holding for five seconds, inhaling for five seconds, and holding for five seconds. Adrenaline and fear sends your body into fight or flight mode. You begin

shallow breathing so that if you need a burst of energy you're ready. Long, measured breaths tell your body that everything is fine. You're tricking your brain into calming down.

### *Addressing Fear*

I also opted to talk to a counselor about my fears. When you voice them out loud, fear loses some of the power it has over you. When fear roams unchallenged through the corners of your mind, then you can start to believe what fear is telling you. But here's a little secret: fear lies. Fear exaggerates. Fear doesn't always get things right.

Fear reminds me a little of my adorable 95-pound golden doodle named Teddy Bear. Teddy barks his head off at every single perceived threat he sees out our front window: the neighbor walking his dog, the mail carrier delivering letters, or even a kid on a bicycle riding down the street. He has one volume: loud. But he sees it as his sacred duty to alert all of us to any potential threat.

That's what fear does. So when I feel my heart racing, when I feel panicky and anxious, I know that's fear at work. And so I take some deep breaths, just like the Navy SEALs, and then I deal with fear, like I deal with Teddy.

I pat Teddy on the head, thank him for letting us know about the threat (even if it's a threat only to him), and I move on. See fear, acknowledge fear, breathe through it, and move on.

When you're dealing with cancer, you've got a whole bunch of decisions to be made about treatment and how you're going to approach this fight. Getting a handle on fear will help you get clear eyed about what you need to do next.

Then you can find a way to deal with it so you can focus on the real issue at hand: fighting cancer. **B**

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