

Dancing with Cancer

Painter, poet, meditation guide and cancer survivor, Judy Erel talks to Claire Gillman about how to create a positive and proactive mindset with which to face the specific challenges and stages of cancer

Your book, *Dancing With Cancer*, is all about empowering the self to aid in both emotional and physical healing. What role do you think the mind has to play on the physical?

My book is about choosing life and joy. And yes, I believe the mind is the very essence that can make or break our emotional and physical resilience, harmony and health. I also know we have the power of choice. We can let our minds replay old stories and unconscious expectations, or, if we become aware, we can consciously harness this amazing power to our own ends.

I learned this first hand at my mother's side when her doctor 'objectively' relayed the treatment protocol for her very aggressive bladder cancer. I felt his negative expectations for the chemo and sensed he pictured her living, but bladderless. I realized Mom was totally influenced by these negative expectations. She was ready to go through the recommended treatment series of chemo bravely, yet in the end she accepted that she would live without her bladder. Only when she became aware of this decision could she change it. I helped her choose another decision consciously – one series of chemo would do the trick. We worked on a positive, pro-active mindset and discussed deep questions to uncover, understand, release and forgive the causes of the cancerous imbalance. Six weeks later she called to tell me the news – she was cancer free. Her doctor didn't believe it and wanted an extra chemo series to be sure. But we knew what happened. That's when the supreme power of the mind and a joyous mindset became part of my deepest knowing.



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JUDY EREL

This experience guided me in my own cancer challenge as I consciously felt my mind dare to go for its best dream and make it happen.

In your book you explore many different kinds of creative expression to help people through their treatments. Do you think there's one that's inherently better or more effective than any others?

Anything that someone enjoys and chooses to do has value, whether you are drawing, sculpting, cooking or running. I believe the effectiveness of creative expression isn't related to what we do, but how we do it. When we surrender to the act of doing we release judgement, stress, worries, thoughts of the past and the future. When we are truly in the doing, we enter our moment of power – the now moment and the "zone" of timeless tranquillity. This is a meditative state where communication with your body is effortless, even to the cellular level. Any activity that gets you there is great. All results are good.

In my book I use journaling, visualizations and drawing as prime examples because they are accessible, easy and can be done almost anywhere by anyone. My favourite is drawing and watercolour for several reasons. First, the range of meaningful, expressive possibilities is enormous and personal. Each person can choose: the colours, whether the drawing is figurative, abstract, or both, and whether the drawing reflects conscious intentions or just is what it is. Secondly, one easily sinks into deep concentration when drawing or colouring. The longer you remain focused in the 'zone', the more

your body hears your inner voice. The last thing I love is that you don't have to understand what you did for it to be effective. That said, any creative activity someone is drawn to can be supportive and promote well being, especially if it enhances joy. Joy heals.

What do you see as the role of intention in your process of dancing with cancer? How did setting goals help you deal with an experience that can feel so overwhelming and insurmountable?

Intentions, like conscious decisions, can be a guiding light. At first my intentions were very general – to be guided to the best healing possible and to live a life of creativity and joy – starting now. These big ideas became the catalyst for focused action. I immersed myself in journaling and drawing, and ideas flowed easily, opening awareness and understanding of how to enhance the positive aspects of the conventional protocols and minimize negative aspects. I felt empowered, curious, even happy. The idea of taking responsibility for myself to the cell level became a reassuring experience through visualizations and drawings. The concept of creating a pro-active, joyous mindset became real and not just empty words.

Uncertainty, physical limitations, and the effects of conventional treatment protocols created times when I was overwhelmed physically and emotionally. Feeling lost was also a reality. I learned that what set me back on track was accepting where I was and just being. I found restating/rewriting my goals to myself or others renewed my sense of empowerment. Then new intentions, tasks and goals could stimulate the creative juices of life to flow again. The more responsibility I took for my healing and pro-active mindset, the more powerful I felt. To tell the truth, I really found it amazing.

You describe how in facing your deepest fears and realities – mortality, doubt, etc – you also found self-love and strength. Can you elaborate on this a bit, and share your advice for other people who might be too scared to confront their own fears in the midst of cancer?

I heard the 'me' deep within me say I was dying and asked me if this was what I wanted. I was curious, not afraid. I discovered enormous strength as my soul spoke from inside me. It was me but it wasn't Judy. I knew first hand that the personality may melt away, but my essence was beyond death. I also knew that if I chose to leave life, it was not a failure. Whichever way I chose was fine. I decided that Judy had more to do and I loved her, so I came back to life. This perspective gave me the strength and understanding to help others in the process of leaving the physical world with greater ease and less fear. We all go sometime.

The most frightening thing I found and find to be is the doubt in one's will or ability to keep living. The reality of cancer magnifies challenges of regular living. I know because I just finished a relapse period and reached new remission. Medications can add to stress letting doubt and exhaustion creep in. I think the most important thing is to be gentle with yourself and look for ways to enjoy the little things. When you do so consciously your mind and your body get the message.

In addition, I've encountered others facing life threatening procedures and I have been able to help by guiding them in a new conscious decision to live using my Choosing Life meditation. A choice of life demands deep desire and strong belief. Choosing life is different than not wanting to die. It is not being at war with the enemy. Choosing life creates a movement in the direction of a new harmony in the body and mind. It is a conscious choice from a place of self-love and deep desire.


As creativity has played such a powerful role in your own cancer journey, can you tell us a bit more about the work you do with other people to help them tap into their form of empowerment?

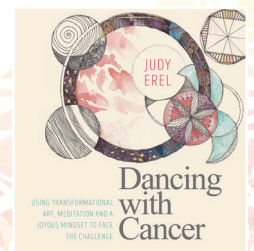
Guided imagery and drawing/colouring activities are my core coaching tools with individuals and groups, and for both I strive to help people touch their inner source, their light, even their cells.

After reaching remission, I began coaching individual cancer patients and leading ad hoc groups in guided imagery and mandala colouring activities in haematology and oncology waiting rooms and outpatient treatment rooms in several hospitals supported by Roche Pharmaceuticals, Israel.

Working with individuals enables the use of these activities to create processes to promote conscious intentions, tranquillity, transform what needs to be changed, release difficult emotions and create inner harmony. Coaching can also focus on preparation for specific protocol procedures.

My weekly hospital activities enabled me to touch hundreds of patients and their companions from all walks of life, religions, ethnic and economic groups on an ad hoc basis. For most, this was their first encounter with guided imagery and meditation, but after I briefly tell my story, most are open to try. Using meditation music to change the tense background energy and noise of the hospitals, I lead a guided meditation found in my book that invites participants to fill their bodies and cells with light and harmony and release all that is not love. The smiling, tranquil faces that greet me at the end of each meditation never cease to thrill.

Then I provide my mandala drawings and coloured pencils for those who choose to engage in creative activity. The process is always stress reducing, healing and often provides an opportunity for further guidance. 



Find out more

• ***Dancing with Cancer: Cancer Self-Empowerment Through Art, Meditation and a Joyous Mindset*** by Judith Erel (£14.99, Watkins Publishing). judyerel.com