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About This Book

“

WHY ON EARTH would anyone title a book like this *The Hero's Journey*?”

This is a question I can imagine someone asking as they pick up this book. It is a title which suggests a person of great strength and courage who travels to other worlds on a long and difficult journey, facing many trials which threaten their physical and psychological self. At the end of this, the hero may be rewarded with a gift or boon.

The term *hero* is used intentionally to reflect the qualities required when undertaking cancer treatment. In mythology, a hero is seen as someone who undertakes a challenging quest

with courage and tenacity and persists in the face of great difficulties. History demonstrates that the “success” of these quests is not only measured in terms of whether the goal is achieved but, just as importantly, that the hero persists even when feeling defeated and weakened.

This is what defines the hero – they continue on despite feeling unsure, fearful and sometimes overwhelmed.

This journey through blood cancer is not a quest you have chosen but the title of this book reflects the qualities required to undergo the immense challenges as you travel through both the medical treatment and the psychological and emotional shock waves which accompany that treatment. As with the hero in myths and legends, it can challenge your very core as you muster qualities of courage, endurance and patience which you may not have known you have and which are tested sometimes to their limit.

Being seen as *a hero* is not a word you probably think of in relation to undergoing this experience, but the personal qualities required to manage a cancer diagnosis and treatment demand these attributes. Often you will think of others as they go through their treatment and you respect their patience and fortitude but can find it hard to acknowledge your own. It is only often in hindsight you can respect the fact that you soldiered on when you thought you had nothing left or it felt like there was little to hope for. It's at times like this, that the qualities inherent in the hero (e.g. endurance, patience, determination) are evident.

The word *journey* is also used deliberately to indicate an experience which has no finite end point, does not always proceed in a straight and predictable line and continues to be a road on which you will travel from your first treatment cycle and beyond. It also refers to the changes which occur in you as you experience the many challenges inherent in living your life during and after treatment. And very often, from this difficult journey emerges an understanding and appreciation of life which exceeds what was experienced before. This wisdom and insight can only be gained by having been on such a journey — this is the *gift* or *boon*.

*** How to read this book ***

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED so you can pick it up and read only a few paragraphs and gain something from that. You don't need to read it cover to cover or in sequence to get the most from it. Also, as cancer treatment rarely goes along in a completely predictable way where you can accurately anticipate every turn, you may find yourself dipping in and out of the book, depending on whether you have a setback or relapse, in which case you may find it useful to read the beginning pages again. You may also find yourself skipping over pages to leap ahead and read about, for example, how to manage uncertainty if this is a major issue for you from diagnosis. There is no “right” way to read this book so use it as it suits you.

* Language *

OVER THE PASSAGE OF TIME, certain words have become associated with cancer and living with a chronic illness — words like *survivor*, *battle*, and *carer*. Some people like these words and find them useful, but many don't. I have tried to minimize the use of these words to make the book as reader-friendly as possible.

I have also spoken in generalities about differences between men and women and I acknowledge there are strategies suggested in the book which will be influenced by gender and cultural sensitivities. I apologize in advance as it is not within the scope of this book to do justice to the nuances inherent in these.

* Sections *

THE HERO'S JOURNEY is divided into sections and each section reflects a part of the journey:

- DEPARTURE deals with your experience at the beginning of the journey when diagnosis occurs.
- INITIATION deals with your experiences on the journey through treatment; it also includes information for those involved in caring for you as you go through this.
- THE RETURN deals with your experience after initial

treatment as you try to adjust again to the everyday world.

- A RESOURCES section at the end of the book gives you some places to find relevant information.

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN from personal and professional experience and with close reference to best practice guidelines to make sure the information is accurate and up to date. While it is written specifically for those of you who have blood cancer, much of it is relevant for any type of cancer.

My hope is the information in this book will help you meet some of the challenges during your journey. If this book reduces some of the emotional and psychological concerns you and your family have, then its purpose has been met.

Stage One Departure

THE DEPARTURE heralds the call to a challenge usually not experienced previously.

It is often abrupt and shocking the way in which “the call” arrives. There may have been increasing symptoms which caused concern or the diagnosis may have been the result of a routine blood test or physical examination. It’s not unusual to have been feeling constantly tired and unwell and to have had repeated tests to find out what was wrong before anything showed up and a diagnosis was possible.

Either way, the initial reaction to a diagnosis is often characterised by a variety of responses.



USUAL RESPONSES AFTER INITIAL DIAGNOSIS

AT THE INITIAL DIAGNOSIS it is usual to experience a cascade of thoughts and emotions, often running simultaneously. The roller-coaster ride begins with fluctuating levels of anxiety, worry and concern as the journey progresses.

* Emotional responses *

FEELINGS ARISE the minute you know something is wrong. This might be a private moment when you first feel a lump, or you have that first awareness that something isn't right and you can't ignore it, or when you first hear the diagnosis from a medical person. There can be a cascade of feelings, constantly coming and going, often a few feelings coming at once. Some of these feelings include shock, disbelief, relief, guilt, anxiety, anger, frustration and fear.

The shock can make it difficult to feel much at all and will have the effect of narrowing your field of vision, concentration and attention so that even tiny details become highlighted and remain with you as part of the memory of that moment.

USUAL RESPONSES AFTER INITIAL DIAGNOSIS



Emotional

shock • disbelief • relief • guilt
anxiety • anger • frustration • fear

Cognitive

intrusive thoughts • catastrophizing
stoicism • being superstitious

Physical

fatigue • tension • stress • pain

Practical

financial • work • medical treatment
housekeeping

Spiritual

“why (now)?” • “did I cause this?” • grief

