

Woulda', coulda', shoulda! Health decisions

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Where I am today has a direct correlation to what I thought and did yesterday. My health, my relationships and my state of mind are the sum of past decisions. What does that say about getting cancer? Sometimes I wonder what I could have done differently to avoid the cancer catastrophe. How far would I have to go to undo the damage?

Maybe it started all the way back in childhood? Were there chemicals in our food, the grass we rolled around in or the paint on our walls? I grew up in a rural environment with vegetable gardens and fruit trees to feed us, so at least some of our food was safe.

But what about the environment within? How I viewed my world began to evolve as I grew up and realized that not everyone could be trusted. I began to protect myself from harm with survival tactics that kept me in a heightened state of alarm. Fear eroded my sense of security, causing untold damage to my immune system.

What does fear and anxiety do to us over time? Maybe that contributed to my eventual illness?

When I was a child I had no idea how to handle these feelings, so I believed what my mind told me and built a fortress around myself. I constructed the walls with excess weight and a tough exterior that provided a false sense of security.

My eating issues remained under control until we moved to Central Oregon. The sense of vulnerability I felt from being in a new place with no friends and an infant daughter hit me hard. I was alone a lot of the time and my isolation grew. By the time I finally began to make friends, I'd developed the habit of using food to assuage all kinds of intense emotions. I had gone over the cliff into addiction without knowing it. Something in my brain had switched on and I followed the cues like an obedient child.

The years of ignoring and being unaware of my feelings took a toll on my health — both mentally and physically. Like everyone else, there were experiences that

confounded me as a child and left me confused and frightened. These days, there are so many more resources available to parents to help their children when something traumatic happens. But in the 1960s and '70s I was on my own. With little support from adults, I had developed my own coping mechanisms that often did more harm than good. I was keeping myself safe, or trying to, but I was also laying down tracks that took me in a direction that eventually I'd have to retrace and face.

To move forward, I had to go back. We're all walking vessels of our past experiences. Some we've worn on our sleeves like shiny medals telling everyone who'll listen about our past hurts and challenges. But the memories we've shoved into dark corners are the ones that often affect us the most. I was unaware of why certain situations and people triggered my anger and fear. My mind had buried them so deeply there wasn't even an indentation left in the ground to clue me in to their existence.

Getting sick washed away some of that topsoil leaving

things exposed for the first time in years. Choosing to dig them up and take a look at what was there was strangely alluring. I felt a sense of curiosity about this little girl and what she'd been through. Facing death opened up opportunities for healing in ways I couldn't imagine. Each day I'm allowed to walk on the earth, I'm compelled to solve the mysteries of me. I'm convinced that the more I face up to my weaknesses the stronger I'll become.

cancers. There is no talk of being cured until you've been cancer-free for five years. So that question always leaves me a bit off balance. I don't know if there are still cancer cells inside me. I have an appointment with my oncologist soon and as much as I try not to go there, it's always scary. I don't allow myself to get worked up before I go. But the sense of relief I feel when I hear everything's OK is huge. It's then that I can admit or even recognize the fear neatly tucked away.

I can't change who I was or how I dealt with difficulties in the past. I know there were missed opportunities along the way.

If I could go back and offer myself some advice I would say, exercise more, eat healthier and go easy on yourself. But most importantly, I would offer encouragement to face the dark places and be free. I'd say that what seems ominous is usually less scary in the light. I'd encourage myself to move beyond past hurts by being honest and willing to see things clearly. In time, choosing courage over denial will provide a healthier me, inside and out.

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I've experienced the dread that comes with a cancer diagnosis. Every day, I am forced to look directly into the eyes of my mortality, especially when I'm asked how I'm feeling and if I'm in remission. I have to explain that breast cancer doesn't go into remission like some other



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