

# Lifting Your Spirits:

*A self-help approach to coping with illness*

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I was diagnosed with cancer two and a half years ago and completed a lengthy but successful treatment. During this time, I used a number of self-help tools for my sustenance and self-healing. I was inspired to write *Lifting Your Spirits* because of the benefits I experienced from their use and the lack of any guide of this kind for people who have been diagnosed with serious illness. I am a writer and facilitator in health and social care, former trustee of the BHMA and publishing adviser to the Janki Foundation for Global Health Care.

## Summary

*This is an extract from my guide (a booklet and two audio CDs) to coping with serious illness, published by the Janki Foundation in April 2008. It offers practical tools for self-help during times of illness. The contents are based on my own experiences and insights and those of others who have coped with serious illness and treatments, with contributions from a range of healthcare practitioners.*

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## Introduction

When serious illness or disability occurs in our life, it may seem as if we have no control over what is happening and that our wellbeing lies in the hands of others. However, within ourselves we have a vast capacity to build our resilience on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level.

The shock of experiencing injury or of being diagnosed with a serious or incurable illness causes major disturbance within all levels of our wellbeing – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual – as well as in our relationships with family and friends, at work and in other spheres of living. The familiar roles and possessions we thought defined us lose their certainty and we find ourselves confronted with big, unanswerable questions – ‘Why this? Why me? Why now?’

Serious illness or injury casts us into a new and unfamiliar role – that of being a ‘patient’ – and we begin to feel separate and isolated from the seeming normality of life going on around us. We enter a world of waiting – waiting for appointments, for tests, for results, for procedures – where we begin to feel that our health and our future are out of our control.

Along with this change in our day-to-day life can come a profound sense of loss and a rollercoaster of

associated emotions. We may deny or resist the reality of our situation, with feelings of ‘this can’t be happening to me’, ‘this shouldn’t happen to me’ and so on. This kind of reaction breeds disappointment, resentment and frustration. Sometimes we feel that there is no point in life any more and that we may as well give up at the first hurdle. Sometimes we get angry and want to blame someone or something for what is happening. We also talk about ‘battling’ cancer or ‘fighting’ depression. While anger may raise our energy to tackle certain problems in the short term, eventually this ‘state of war’ affects our bodies and minds in ways that drain our energy and increase mental stress, just at a time when we need to marshal our strengths and resources.

As we begin to accept and cope with our illness or disability, we may find ourselves still dwelling on negative thoughts or even picking them up from those around us. These fuel our sense of separateness and can even lead to physical problems, adversely affecting our energy, immune system, digestion, blood pressure and so on. Negative thoughts can also create feelings of fatigue, hopelessness, depression and an inability to think clearly or make decisions.

All around us, our partners, close friends and family members will be deeply affected by what is happening. While we want to help them to deal

with their own reactions and feelings, we may not have the personal resources to do so.

So how can we keep unnecessary suffering at bay? How can we keep our spirits lifted, and even appreciate the journey illness takes us on?

## Illness and opportunity

*'Understanding that life is all about learning, I can accept and come to enjoy whatever I do.'*

Many people who have experienced serious illness or disability comment on how it has offered some unforeseen and positive benefits in their lives. These commonly include opportunities for them to:

- slow down and enjoy a gentler pace of life
- reflect on their life situation and make positive changes to their priorities
- observe and take enjoyment from their natural surroundings
- develop more meaningful relationships with partners, friends, family and colleagues
- take up or return to creative pursuits and hobbies
- learn new skills
- deepen their spiritual awareness and practice
- prepare for the future and put their affairs in order.

Surprisingly, illness presents us with unexpected moments of fun, happiness, peace and fulfilment, which arise from a growing ability to live in the moment. We discover personal strengths and qualities we didn't know we had. These can help us to cope in positive ways with the change and challenges we face, and to find a new sense of balance and wellbeing.

## Seven helpful tools

*Lifting Your Spirits* has been developed to help people discover this more positive and gentle way of coping with illness. It is designed for those who are:

- diagnosed with a serious physical illness
- coping with pain or disability
- undergoing difficult treatments
- receiving palliative care
- recovering from accident or physical trauma
- experiencing or recovering from mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

The materials can also benefit hard-pressed carers and healthcare practitioners by introducing ways of nurturing themselves.

The guide introduces seven self-help tools:

- Tool 1: Meditation
- Tool 2: Visualisation
- Tool 3: Appreciation
- Tool 4: Creativity
- Tool 5: Listening
- Tool 6: Play
- Tool 7: Reflection

Each tool is explored in the guide with suggestions for simple practices, positive thoughts, short reflections and a range of guided visualisations, poems, stories and song on audio CD. The particular benefits of regular practice during daily routines and healthcare treatments, even for as little as a minute or two, may include:

- a lessening of pain, anxiety and distress
- a growing sense of inner peace and stability
- an increase in positive and resourceful thinking and behaviour (which may then have positive effects on others around you)
- greater resilience in your body, mind and emotions
- learning more about who you are and recognising your inner resources
- being able to stand back from difficult situations (which can help you cope more effectively)
- increased fulfilment in relationships with others
- living positively in the present moment and accepting your situation.

Using the tools may also foster or deepen a spiritual connection (for example, to nature or to the Divine) which can support the individual through difficult stages of their illness, treatment or rehabilitation, as well as give a special meaning to their life.

### **TOOL 1** *Meditation: discovering the power of peace*

*'When I find my inner peace I can handle anything.'*

Finding a time for silence gives us an opportunity to discover our inner peace. It enhances our general health and wellbeing, and instils a sense of stability during the turbulence of illness or trauma. The practice of quietening and focusing the mind is often called meditation and there are many meditation techniques. Many people say that they cannot meditate because they are unable to 'still' the mind. Instead of trying to stop thinking, we can just focus on peaceful thoughts. Even a minute spent in this way takes our minds off pain and worries and leaves us feeling refreshed. It helps us to surface some inner qualities such as love or patience, which can strengthen and nurture us on every level.

As you practise bringing peaceful thoughts and images into your mind, it is very common for unwanted

thoughts to pop up. Treat your mind as you would a small child who is distracted or misbehaving. Keep guiding it gently back to your desired focus, again and again. In time, you will find that you can experience brief moments of stillness and silence between your thoughts. This is the essence of meditation.

*'Following my diagnosis, I found it difficult to sit in silence. My mind teemed with anxious thoughts and was continually drawn to what was going on in my body, in particular to the pain experienced from a fast-growing tumour. However, there were fleeting moments in which I could just observe my pain, as if I were detached from my physical body. It was in these moments that I began to experience a brief sense of peace.'*



### Benefits of meditation during illness

- It reduces anxiety, fear and stress.
- It reduces our experience of pain.
- It improves sleep.
- It increases positive thoughts and psychological strength.
- It helps us to develop self-knowledge and self-reliance.
- It promotes feelings of peacefulness and spiritual connection.

### TOOL 2 Visualisation: picturing good health

*'I like to picture myself full of happiness, good health and energy.'*

When we are facing the challenge of illness, treatment or recovery, what we 'see' in our minds can help or hinder us on our journey. Sometimes we conjure up negative scenes that impair our self-confidence and capacity to cope, just at a time when we need to feel strong and good about ourselves. These pictures may be prompted

by our own fears and feelings, or by unhelpful things that other people say or do. On the other hand, we can picture positive outcomes, such as our body getting stronger, our mind calming or our spirit growing more peaceful. The tool that can help us to do this is known as visualisation.

Visualisation is not just about seeing pictures in our heads. It is about using all our senses to create a positive vision of how we would like things to be. Depending on which senses are easiest for us to tap into, we can see, touch, hear and smell scenes that are helpful to our sense of wellbeing. Along with these, we can use positive words to create uplifting thoughts and feelings. Imagining ourselves coping, and feeling safe and well, can help us to overcome difficulties and counter our own and others' negative thoughts, words and actions.

*'Facing major surgery initiated many negative feelings. How could I overcome the intense fear that seemed to be controlling my thoughts and dragging me into a very dark place? I decided to try using visualisation. I knew that for visualisation to work well I needed to use all five senses – seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling – and practise as many times as possible throughout the days prior to the event. I pictured a large TV screen and watched an imaginary film of myself going through the entire process – leaving home, so relaxed, arriving at the hospital, cheerful and at ease, going through all the medical procedures, calm and strong, going down to theatre, peaceful and confident, seeing my surgeon as the best in the world, so I would have a very good outcome and a quick recovery. My surgeon was amazed at how relaxed my body was during the operation and had never experienced a patient recover from this type of surgery so quickly.'*

### Benefits of visualisation during illness

- It improves our ability to relax.
- It creates positive thoughts, images and feelings.
- It boosts our resilience and natural immunity.
- It increases our capacity to cope.
- It helps us to feel safe and in control.

### TOOL 3 Appreciation: giving thanks

*'I feel grateful for just being here today.'*

While feelings like anger, jealousy and simmering resentment can feed illness, feeling positive aids recovery and boosts the immune system. One of the most effective ways of lifting ourselves out of negative thinking is to actively appreciate the good in ourselves and our lives.

It might seem odd to focus on being appreciative in situations that involve difficult treatments and uncertain

outcomes. However, showing appreciation on a regular basis can make you feel better in both body and mind. The tool of appreciation honours those things in life that give us health, vitality and success.

Appreciation is really about noticing and affirming the good about ourselves, about others and about the world around us. Beginning with ourselves, we can think about all the unique qualities we have and all the things we are able to do, however small. We can also remember all the positive things we have in our lives and all those fulfilling experiences we have had.

Next, we can extend this practice to others, by noticing their ‘goodness’, rather than finding fault and opportunities for criticism. When we show appreciation to others, it is helpful to be very specific. For example, we can say what it was about what they did that we found helpful. It is also important to show sincerity in the way that we voice our appreciation, for example, in tone of voice and gesture. When hard-pressed carers, whether healthcare professionals, volunteers or family, receive unexpected thanks and positive feedback in this way, they will feel ‘topped up’ and better able to continue with their efforts to care for and support you.

We can also give thanks for our surroundings. We can relish the comfort of a warm bed or a relaxing bath. We can appreciate the beauty of nature through a window or when we are outdoors.

Showing appreciation can be a stepping stone to the expression of deep gratitude. Even the most challenging days bring gifts to be grateful for, and feeling and showing gratitude becomes like a plate of tasty food, nourishing us from within. It can also become the basis for spiritual practice, when we give thanks to the Divine or to a greater power for guiding and sustaining us.

*‘After a particularly difficult examination, I gave some specific thanks to the nurse by saying “Thank you for holding my hand in such a caring way during the examination. It really helped me to stay calm.” Remembering to show appreciation gives me some control over what is happening to me. It encourages me to think positively in the most difficult situations. I then tend to act positively and my actions affect others around me in positive ways. It’s like a virtuous circle.’*

### Benefits of appreciation during illness

- It enhances our health and our immune system.
- It boosts positive thinking, motivation and self-esteem.
- It provides positive feedback and reinforcement for others.
- It creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and good feelings.
- It provides a basis for spiritual connection.

## TOOL 4 Creativity: learning to express ourselves

*‘When I am being creative I feel alive and full of energy.’*

Illness can be a time when we are moved to express ourselves through writing, painting or other creative pursuits. We can also discover a capacity to generate creative solutions to problems.



Giving ‘voice’ to our unique creativity is essentially healing on all levels and has been recognised as such by the introduction of a range of art therapies in healthcare. When we express ourselves creatively, we engage the intuitive, right side of the brain, rather than the left side, which is dominated by logic and reason. Any creative pursuits can help us to by-pass our busy, thinking mind and reach a still place from which we can generate new ideas, explore our feelings and connect with ourselves at a deeper level. They can also revitalise our energies and provide a sense of fulfilment.

Many of us say that we are not creative, perhaps remembering the childlike drawings or paintings we produced long ago. Instead, let’s think about creativity as a process, one that allows us to explore and learn about ourselves. We can go about our simple, everyday activities in a creative way. Arranging flowers in a vase, food on a plate, hair on a head or words on a page are all examples of ways in which we can express our unique creativity.

We can also spend time in creative pursuits like painting, writing, music, gardening or sewing. In fact, illness can present us with unexpected time and opportunity to take up or return to a creative hobby, perhaps something we always wanted to do. The important thing is to enjoy and immerse ourselves in the doing, rather than be concerned about what we produce at the end.

Learning to relax deeply can be a first step to being creative, as we set aside current concerns and calm the

busy mind. Once we are fully engaged in the creative process, we feel free from the constraints of our bodies, our minds and our situation.

*'I collected together all the beautiful cards that people had sent during my illness. I cut out some of the most inspiring images and words and sat down to make a collage. I got quite carried away with glue and glitter and felt like a child again. While I worked I pictured my own 'wellness' and a very beautiful and surprising picture emerged. I put it on the wall and still look at it every day when I'm feeling tired or down.'*

### Benefits of creativity during illness

- It helps us to generate new ideas and solutions to problems.
- It enables us to access a quality of peacefulness, free from worry and pain.
- It provides a route to exploring our feelings and learning more about ourselves.
- It allows us to express ourselves in our own, unique ways.

### **TOOL 5** Listening: deepening our connection with others

*'When I listen with my whole self, it feels healing for both me and for the other person.'*

Really listening to others and encouraging them to listen to us is an important step in promoting the wellbeing of both ourselves and our carers. A common complaint among patients is that we are not listened to by healthcare professionals. We feel anxious when we come in for a consultation or procedure, and find it difficult to explain our experiences and concerns. We 'hear' what the practitioner is saying, yet remember little of it afterwards. Consultations are time-limited, and healthcare professionals themselves can feel stressed and unsupported. Similar pressures exist for our carers at home. Our family will be worrying about us and we feel anxious for them. No wonder that patients, practitioners and carers are not always in the 'right space' to listen to and connect with each other.

A few minutes of deep and active listening improves communication and the sense of being connected to each other. It helps to create a feeling of mutual satisfaction at home, at the end of a treatment or during a consultation.

Effective listening means concentrating on what the other person is saying, without the interruption of our own thoughts and feelings. The first step is for us to relax into a state of calmness, so that our minds can be clear and receptive. If we are fully present for the other person in this way, then they will be fully present for us

and we can both reap the benefits. By listening deeply, we 'model' the qualities we would like to receive from the other person and an atmosphere of tolerance and open-heartedness is created.

If we are talking with a healthcare practitioner about our illness or treatment, we may rightly feel some anxiety. However, if we can trust that it is the other person's intention to help or support us, this will help us to relax and we can then listen with our complete attention.

*'I experiment with deep listening when I am with my consultant. It seems to remove some of the barriers between patient and doctor. It is as if I am setting an example of how I wish to be treated and this is then responded to. I am able to tell my story in my own way and to have this listened to and understood. This feels good for me and, I think, for him too.'*

### Benefits of deep listening during illness

- It helps to neutralise feelings of anxiety and anger.
- It benefits the listener as well as the receiver.
- It creates an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual caring.

### **TOOL 6** Play: enjoying the benefits of fun and laughter

*'I deserve to have fun and to enjoy life.'*

Illness is a serious business, and people around us may feel that it is only appropriate to be solemn. Yet being playful and light-hearted lifts our own mood as well as those of our family, friends and carers.

When we watch children play, they seem to be totally caught up in the moment, unaware of how they look to the outside world. In contrast, we usually picture adults playing organised sports or perhaps musical instruments, where there are many rules and norms of behaviour. As adults, we rarely consider playing for playing's sake. In fact, we may feel that it is childish or indulgent to just 'play'. We feel embarrassed at the very thought of making fools of ourselves in front of other people. Yet it is play that allows us to drop the roles and masks we wear and bring more of who we truly are to the fore. It encourages us to be accepting and tolerant of ourselves, our situations and other people.

We can learn to be 'play-full' in the way in which we engage with life, even during times of illness. We all have a playful side and when we find it we experience a wonderful feeling of liberation and lightness. If we let our inner joyful nature shine through, we will reap many healing benefits.

With play, the activity and any goals are unimportant, as long as we are doing something we enjoy. The

important thing is to allow ourselves to be spontaneous and carefree, willing to take the risk of getting it wrong. Playing with others, whether through board games, bowling or dancing, has an important social dimension. It encourages a quality of interaction that can be more fulfilling than our normal conversations and contacts.

Laughter, too, is extremely therapeutic. It has proven physical and mental benefits, including boosting the immune system, providing aerobic exercise for the heart and diaphragm, improving sleep, enhancing mental function, increasing pain tolerance and boosting our sense of well-being. Laughter releases endorphins around our bodies. No wonder clowns are now being introduced onto hospital wards.

Laughing with ourselves and others helps us to put things in perspective and learn from our behaviour. It enhances self-esteem and enables us to connect with others at a deeper level.

*‘Following my accident, I was immobilised for a long time. My young grandson would visit me sometimes after school and bring a variety of board games. I hadn’t played any games since I was a kid and yet I found myself totally engrossed. It was me who shouted and laughed loudest when the stakes got high! The time flew and I forgot how frustrated I had been about being stuck in a chair all day.’*

### Benefits of play and laughter during illness

- It provides relaxation and reduces stress.
- It diffuses anger and negative emotions.
- It helps us to put things in perspective and see the ‘lighter’ side.
- It helps us to overcome barriers and difficulties.
- It provides many health benefits, both physical and mental.
- It enables self-expression and self-learning.
- It promotes better communication with others.

### **TOOL 7** Reflection: making time for meeting ourselves

*‘I focus on how far I have come, rather than how far I have to go.’*

The experience of illness or trauma often leads us to dwell on the past and how things used to be. This can naturally lead to a sense of loss and feelings of sadness, denial or anger. However, illness also offers a rare opportunity to take a fresh look at what is important and gives meaning in our lives. We can take time for reflection.

Making time for reflection can help us to remember our enduring strengths and qualities, and make sense of illness as part of life’s journey. From a place of calm and

peacefulness, we can stand back and look at ourselves and what has happened, from the outside. We can begin to understand our own reactions and release any feelings of anger, anxiety and attachment. We can then focus on how far we have come, not how far we have to go. This helps us to build on our positive experiences and strengthen our self-esteem.

Reflection as a tool is about processing our thoughts and experiences from a place of stillness and without judgment. As we practise, we can recognise mistakes we have made without feeling we have failed. If we have feelings of guilt, we can forgive others and forgive ourselves. We begin to take a more detached view about what is happening and learn from our experiences. We can also focus on the positive contributions we made and what went right in a situation.

Reflection can also help us to come to a place of acceptance concerning our illness and to prepare for the future, whatever it holds, on a practical, emotional or spiritual level.

*‘Confined to bed for long periods because of my illness, I began to think of the holidays we took as a family over all those years. I would choose one holiday and try and remember it in as much detail as I could – the weather, the places we visited, the food, and so on. But what came back most was people’s friendliness and the fun we had. It made me feel good.’*

### Benefits of reflection during illness

- It enables us to observe and let go of negative emotions.
- It helps us to learn from our mistakes.
- It increases acceptance and contentment in our life.
- It reduces stress.
- It boosts self-esteem.
- It helps us to consider the future, whatever it holds.

The Janki Foundation for Global Health Care is a UK-based healthcare charity dedicated to positive human development. Drawing on research demonstrating that positive states of mind promote health and healing, it has developed a unique personal and team development programme in support of healthcare professionals, called *Values in Healthcare: A Spiritual Approach*.

*Lifting Your Spirits* is a companion guide that has been developed specifically for patients (available from the Janki Foundation and from the BHMA).

Together, these materials support a whole-person approach to healthcare, an approach that considers the needs of patients and practitioners at all levels of body, mind and spirit.

[www.jankifoundation.org](http://www.jankifoundation.org)

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