

Newsletter Blast

On Living Fully

December is upon us and, with that, many of us are spending time with our extended families as we celebrate holidays and school breaks. With that, my attention turns to the joys and challenges of being with family and, specifically, how the presence of cancer in a family member affects family experience.

As families get created and develop, it is normal that patterns of relating and connecting to different individuals in the family system arise. This is the reason for the predictability of many family gatherings. For example, with Thanksgiving just behind us, ask yourself whether you were able to predict who grabbed the biggest piece of pie, who generously passed on the last spoonful of stuffing, who disappeared when it was time to clean up, who entertained all the little kids, who started the argument about religion or politics, and who fell asleep in front of the football game?

When someone or something new enters a family, the old ways of relating are challenged – and they may change. For example, if immediately after dinner the new in-law begins to carry dishes to the kitchen while others scurry to plant themselves in front of the football game, that's going to be noticed! With a little luck maybe someone else will even join in the cleaning up!

Cancer in a family member can have a similar impact – for better or for worse. If 58-year old big sister is the one recently diagnosed with cancer, for example, maybe 54-year old little sister will drop her role as the “baby” in the family and take charge of Christmas dinner this year; a new tradition has been born. Or, more commonly, change does not come about nearly so easily. Instead, maybe little sister whines and cries that she is so busy that she won't even be able to contribute her usual Christmas cookies this year! Or, when little sister makes moves to take charge of the holiday dinner, maybe big sister will rant and rave and say “Absolutely not!”

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy famously said, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I disagree; in my experience every family is unique in the system of relating and connecting that it creates. Whether a family is happy or unhappy depends on the rigidity and flexibility of its system. With flexibility comes the possibility of adapting to new circumstances thereby creating the space necessary for happiness to enter.

To illustrate the importance of flexibility, consider the big sister/little sister examples above. Imagine how different things would be if big sister recognized that giving up hosting Christmas dinner felt like giving up her role as family matriarch leading her to fear that she would lose her purpose in this family. Imagine also that little sister is scared to step up to the plate; what if she doesn't do as good a job as big sister has always done? Now imagine that the two sisters could share these feelings with each other. How wonderfully they might be able to reassure the other! And how much easier it would be to come up with a new way of doing things!

During this holiday season and as you enter 2014; I invite you to take another look at your family, your role in it, and the role others play. Given your current experience with cancer, how well are these roles working? Take this look with curiosity and compassion. Human beings are endlessly creative and every family comes up with satisfying and less satisfying ways of being. That is normal. Developing a stance of compassionate awareness allows for flexibility, reduces the need for rigidity, and creates the possibility for change.

Wishing you gentleness and compassion,
Janneke

Full Cancer Living

Living fully with cancer is about responding with resilience rather than resistance. This ongoing group addresses the psychological, social and spiritual issues that are normal to people living with cancer.

This group is led by Janneke van Beusekom, licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist.

When: For dates, to register or for more information, call 393-3002 or email info@lancaster-therapy.com

Location: Lancaster Cancer Center Lobby

