

Prevailing Over Safety Challenges: What I Learned from Cancer Survival

In my *ISHN* column last June I disclosed my prostate cancer and drew parallels between a cancer diagnosis and an occupational injury. Then, in October, my *ISHN* article revealed similarities and differences between recovering from cancer surgery versus an occupational injury. Today, I'm a cancer survivor as a result of certain medical and personal strategies. My battle is not over, by a long shot, but I'm optimistic because I have a research-based action plan.

In this presentation I draw some parallels between my strategies for continuing to survive cancer and those for achieving an injury-free workplace. First, I want to emphasize that these suggestions for continued success are founded on empirical results, not common sense. The data were obtained by Greg Anderson, author of "Cancer: 50 Essential Things to Do" (Plume, 1999).

In 1984, Mr. Anderson was diagnosed with metastasized lung cancer, and was told he only had 30 days to live. Refusing to accept this hopeless state, he searched for individuals who had survived cancer that doctors labeled "terminal." He looked for common patterns among more than 500 interviews, and from these derived his own action plan. In 1985, Mr. Anderson started the Cancer Conquerors Foundation, which later became the Cancer Recovery Foundation of America.

To date, Mr. Anderson has surveyed more than 15,000 people who survived cancer, and he travels extensively to conduct workshops on his findings. His book on cancer survival is practical and hope-filled, and includes lessons for

safety achievement as well as overall wellness. Here I relate the eight most important strategies, and explain their relevance to industrial safety.

1. Start with Conventional Treatment

Mr. Anderson found that the overwhelming majority of cancer survivors received conventional, research-based, medical treatment. Rather than subscribing to alternative untested methods, more than 96% of the survivors he surveyed adopted a treatment plan founded on recognized conventional Western medical protocols. They demanded hard evidence that a certain medical treatment worked.

Likewise, effective safety pros do not base their safety processes on common sense, sales pitches, or hearsay. They benchmark for empirical evidence that certain techniques work. And, they don't abandon a standard procedure for something new and untested. They choose to add components to their comprehensive process on the basis of objective evidence.

2. Take Personal Control and Expect the Best

Those who triumph over cancer do not stop with conventional treatment. They believe wellness is not a matter of luck, but requires daily commitment and effort. Active involvement is essential. They maintain a healthy outlook on life.

Likewise, safety leaders realize injury prevention is not accidental. It's not unplanned nor unintentional. Rather, injury-prevention interventions are developed, implemented, and refined on a continuous basis. And the more people participating, the greater the beneficial impact.

Anderson also reports that cancer survivors “have a refreshing sense of skepticism about ‘just-think-positive’ solutions” (p. 11). They are tough-minded realists. They don’t deny the negative consequences associated with a lack of personal involvement in wellness. Similarly, safety leaders realize injury prevention demands never-ending attention. They maintain focus and self-motivation by imagining the most negative consequences that could occur if they don’t stay actively involved.

3. Exercise for Fitness and Body Awareness

Heavily sedated, weak, and emaciated, Greg Anderson found it painful to move. But his telephone contacts voiced a consistent refrain – exercise. So, Greg exercised through the pain. He commanded his body to move. Starting with simple arm movements, he progressed to short walking routines and eventually to a daily exercise regimen of stretching, push-ups, sit-ups, and a 30-minute walk. Today, Mr. Anderson believes “exercise ranked second only to developing a belief that recovery was possible” (p. 13) in starting him on the road to recovery and total wellness.

This advice is not new to the safety pro. “Fit for work” is a slogan we all should take seriously. While ergonomics challenges us to make the environment more user friendly, it’s also important to consider user fitness. Leading companies begin the workday with brief stretching routines, and provide facilities and incentives for employee exercise programs.

As the workforce gets older and more years are expected (or allowed) before retirement, we can anticipate the physical condition of workers to become

a more significant contributor to workplace injuries. A critical antidote: A sensible stretching and exercise routine.

4. Maintain a Sense of Purpose

In my *ISHN* column last October, I related how my goal to contribute to the Professional Development Conference (PDC) of the American Society for Safety Engineers (ASSE) fueled my recovery process. Just 15 days after a radical retropublic prostectomy, I traveled to Nashville to give a day-long pre-conference workshop and keynote address at the ASSE PDC. I perceived that my ASSE presentations could help others handle the human dynamics of injury prevention. Therefore, I was determined to make myself physically capable for the post-surgery trip.

Anderson reports that cancer triumphantists perceive they are needed – that their lives have special and unique purposes. “Many are energized by an inner, even transcendent, life mission” (p. 14). But, the author adds that “survivors balance this profound idea of life purpose with a lighter, more playful attitude of fun for fun’s sake” (p. 14).

Doesn’t this advice ring true for all of us, whether overcoming a physical illness, struggling with interpersonal conflicts and disappointments, or dealing with the daily challenges of safety management? With the vision of an injury-free workplace, safety leaders set process goals relevant to their actively-caring mission.

Furthermore, Anderson reports that “survivors feel that they are privileged to be able to help others in meaningful ways. In helping others, they help

themselves” (p. 14). Although the author is referring to cancer survivors, this is true for the survival of most any life difficulty. Safety pros can take solace in the fact that their entire profession is about helping others in meaningful ways. Their professional mission statement epitomizes actively caring, the highest level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. This is going beyond self-actualization to reach self-transcendence.

5. Nurture Supportive Relationships

From my cancer diagnosis to recovery, support from family, friends, colleagues, and students made success possible. People gave me purpose to get beyond traditional treatment and to get back to my pre-cancer lifestyle. While my recovery was inspired by others, I also became more aware of the value of relationships with other people. Anderson found that “cancer survivors invest more time and emotional energy in relationships that nurture them and invest less in those that are toxic” (p. 15). In other words, survivors become “relationship sensitive,” evaluating the benefits and costs of maintaining the variety of interpersonal relationships in their entire social support systems. This often leads to change.

Safety leaders realize the critical role of interpersonal trust and support in meeting the daily challenges of injury prevention. People must rely on the assistance of other people to recognize and eliminate environmental hazards, to observe their own work behaviors and provide constructive feedback, to report personal experiences (like near hits) that could contribute to the prevention of personal injury, and to offer suggestions for improving any aspect of the work

culture related to safety success. Bottom line: Achieving and maintaining an injury-free workplace requires the *interdependent* support of every employee, *independent* of one's status in the organizational hierarchy.

6. Raise Nutritional IQ and Eat Responsibly

Most survivors of cancer alter their eating behavior. While there is no universal agreement regarding what specific dietary changes are called for, survivors raise their nutritional intelligence and eat more fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. They adopt a mindset of eating for body nutrition rather than pleasure.

From a safety perspective, this action guideline relates to being “fit for work.” Obviously, the food we eat can result in a number of physiological and psychological states related to injury potential. How often, for example, have you felt tired and sluggish after a meal? Such a state can hinder environmental awareness, mental alertness, personal judgment, and reaction time. Any of these changes makes personal injury more likely. Thus, a holistic approach to injury prevention should include basic lessons in the nutritional gains and liabilities of various foods.

7. Improve Awareness and Control of Emotions

Cancer survivors become more aware and accepting of their emotions, both positive and negative. More importantly, they work hard at managing their emotions. Rather than letting emotions control their lives, survivors adopt strategies like mental imagery, meditation, reframing, supportive self-talk, and positive affirmations to gain emotional comfort and well-being.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) was the theme of one of my earlier *ISHN* contributions (October, 1996), and I have also discussed how mental imagery and mental scripting can be used to increase personal responsibility or self-accountability for workplace safety (see, for example, my *ISHN* columns in August, 1998; July, 1999; and July, 2000). Here I only want to make the point that EQ is relevant for both cancer survival and injury control.

Less emotional turmoil means less distress, greater reality awareness, and more opportunity for positive emotions. And, positive emotions in a workforce, lead to interdependency and actively caring between people. In other words, positive emotions lead to increases in self-esteem, optimism, and a sense of belonging. And as I explained in a much earlier *ISHN* paper (January, 1993), these person states increase the likelihood a person will actively care for the safety or health of another individual.

8. Discover Spiritual and Meaningful Inner Peace

Cancer survivors undergo a spiritual transformation. This is not about religion. In fact, many survivors reject traditional religious doctrine and practices. Rather, according to Greg Anderson, “it is a radical but serene response to recovery and to life” (p. 17). Many survivors discover the divinity within themselves, thereby achieving inner peace.

So now we have SQ (spiritual intelligence) as well as EQ. People with SQ perceive meaningful purpose underlying their actions, and this motivates them to be the best they can be. However, the meaningfulness of everyday behavior is

often not evident, and therefore the search for SQ can be difficult for some people. But not for the dedicated safety pro.

It's easy to find meaningfulness in the daily routines of effective safety leaders. Although you can't count the number of injuries prevented by implementing or supporting a certain safety process, the potential is clear and meaningful. And when you persuade others to substitute safe behavior for more convenient and efficient at-risk behavior, you increase their EQ. And helping to increase another person's EQ is a meaningful accomplishment, nourishing your own SQ.

In Conclusion

This third part of my cancer story reviewed eight common action plans among cancer survivors. They are not based on common sense, but were derived from interviewing more than 15,000 triumphant cancer patients. My common sense tells me these strategies are relevant for prevailing over many life challenges, including the human dynamics of occupational safety. Do you agree?

There are obvious parallels between surviving cancer and being physically and mentally fit for work. In both cases, exercise and nutrition are critical, as well as the maintenance of personal control, optimism, social support, and a sense of purpose. These strategies build both EQ and SQ, which in turn provide intrinsic motivation for more occurrences of these mental and physical action plans for prevailing over life challenges.

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