

WHAT'S
NEED
FOR MY
LIFE?™

A Survivor's Guide to Managing the Emotions
of Cancer Diagnosis, Treatment

By Paula Holland De Long CPCC, ACC

How to Use this Journal

This journal is intended to provide you with information on key emotional experiences and challenges that come with any cancer diagnosis, and help you normalize, acknowledge, and release your emotions through journaling. All of your emotions right now are normal and natural, and releasing them will help you reduce stress and promote health during your cancer experience.

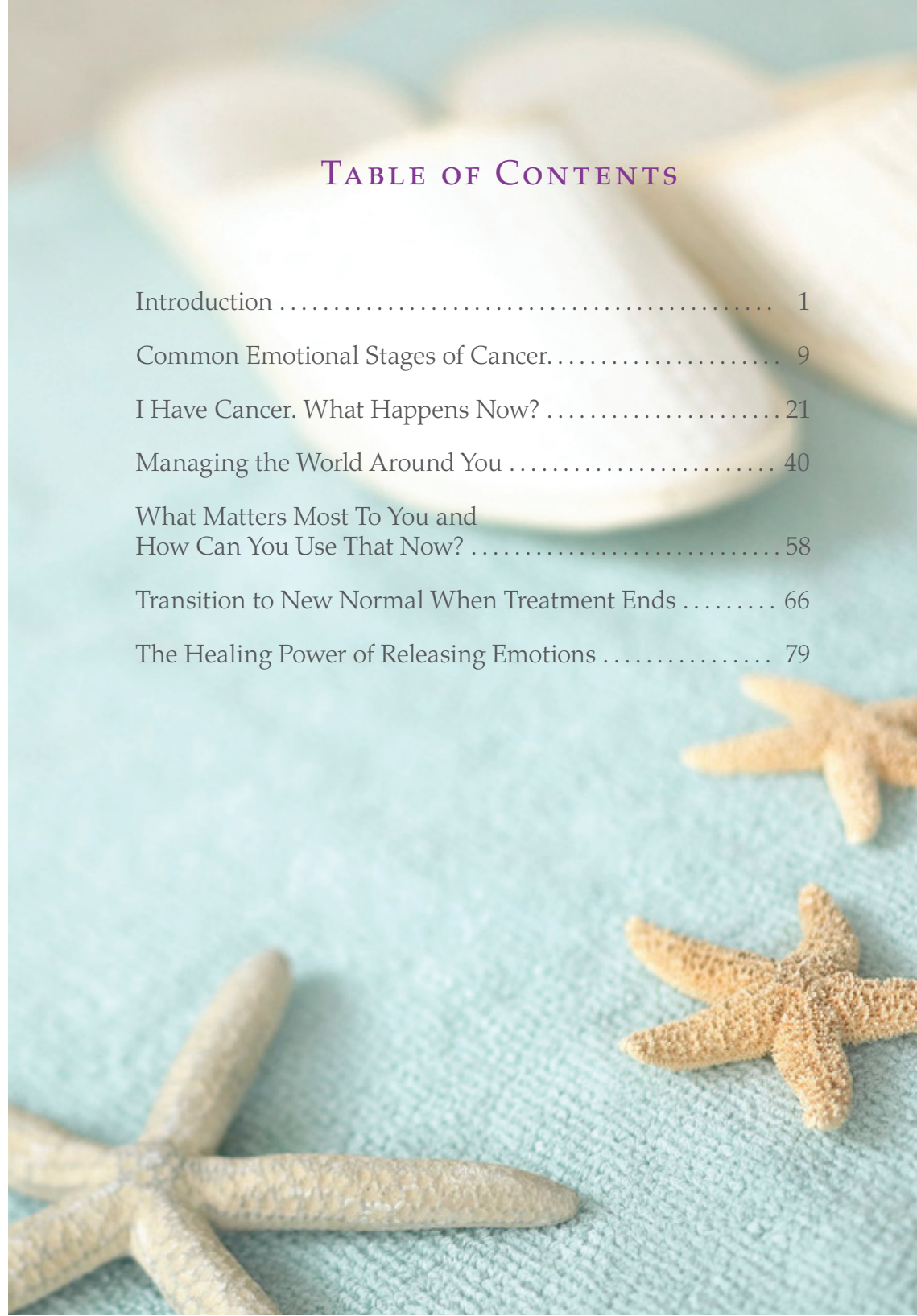
The journal is structured in sections that provide information from the author and other survivors. Each section also has questions or thoughts for you to think about. We encourage you to write about your feelings as you go through your cancer treatment.

You can answer all, none, or any of the questions. Pick the ones that feel important to you.

We have tried to provide enough space for your personal writings but feel free to add your own paper if needed.

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Welcome

My name is Paula Holland De Long, CPCC, ACC. I'm a breast cancer survivor, professional life coach, speaker, educator, and expert in managing the emotions of the cancer experience.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer thirteen years ago, when I was 37. One day I was living my life, and somehow, three weeks later I was in a hospital minus my left breast, wondering what had hit me, and afraid I was going to die. The shock and disbelief had barely sunk in before I was living it, afraid, and not knowing what was next for my life. I remember the pain and fear of not knowing what was going to happen, the tedious numbness while continually putting one foot in front of the other during treatment, and keeping my *I'm fine* face on and my wig straight in 90 degree temperatures and 90 percent humidity. I was trying to be superwoman at a time when I often could barely get out of bed. All of my focus was on reaching that magic time when this cancer stuff would end and my life could go back to normal.

Nine surgeries and four rounds of chemo later, my treatment did end. Everyone was so thrilled that I was *done* with cancer. Well, guess what? I was bald, weighed 95 pounds, and had scars all over my body. I didn't know what normal was anymore and I had no idea what to do about it.

The necessity of creating a *New Normal* life after diagnosis, surgeries, and chemo granted me permission to choose for the first time in my adult life. It forced me into brutal honesty with myself and the people I love. For the first time, I questioned my place in the world and my purpose for being alive. This experience created clarity for me beyond my wildest dreams, and led me to my passion and purpose – supporting thousands of patients and survivors, and helping them manage the roller coaster of emotions that accompany a cancer diagnosis.

I founded What's Next For My Life, Inc. because I know that a positive attitude and reduced stress can have a beneficial impact on health, healing, and quality of life when you are newly diagnosed and going through treatment. With so much focus on the medical, our complex range of emotions including – fear, joy, uncertainty, gratefulness, frustration, fatigue, and hope – are often not addressed. These emotions may begin with diagnosis, but they continue throughout treatment and beyond.

This book is a message of hope, wisdom, and knowledge from me and other cancer patients and survivors. I hope sharing our experiences will help you manage your emotions during this challenging time of your life.

So take some deep breaths and turn the pages. There is no good or bad or right or wrong in this journal: there is only you, and the authenticity, courage, and legacy of your experience, no matter what the future holds.

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I have cancer what happens now?

Each person's cancer journey is unique. You and I could have the exact same diagnosis, surgery, chemo, radiation, or other treatments and have vastly different experiences. Facing the possibility of our own untimely death and how it would impact the people we love is one of the biggest fears we all share. Most of us experience a normal, natural roller coaster of emotions when we are diagnosed and going through treatment. I want you to know the roller coaster levels out over time.

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**So take a few deep breaths and try to relax.
Here's what your fellow survivors want you
to know about what happens next.**

We want you to know that you are not alone in this journey, that you will find hope, love, and humor along with fear and pain. You are now part of an exclusive community filled with people who want nothing more than to help you through this experience, no matter what happens.



What do you mean I have cancer?

When my doctor told me that I had breast cancer, I lost my hearing. Literally. I could see her mouth moving but had no idea what she was saying. Shock, disbelief, anger, and fear were roaring around in my head, screaming, “You have cancer and you’re going to die!” As days passed and we made decisions about my next steps, my fear started to fade and the urge to fight for my life kicked in.

Often, the most emotionally challenging time is between cancer diagnosis and the development of a treatment plan. The unknown horrors your mind conjures up are usually much worse than reality.

Do you know yet what your treatment plan will be?

If you don't know the details yet, what are you most concerned about now?

If you do know, list the details of your diagnosis and treatment plan.



Intimacy and Sex: The Elephant in the Room

Our perceptions and experiences of love, intimacy, sex, and passion are changed or challenged by cancer's invasion. Often, this trauma is worse than the actual diagnosis.

During and after cancer, it's normal to be anxious and unsure about how others will respond. It's normal not to want sex, to be hesitant to share your scars, to feel different about the way you look, and to be fearful about how others will respond to the changes in your body. It's normal to be afraid that the person who loves you will stop doing so, or to be afraid that no one will want you or love you again.

The first time you face your changes physically and emotionally is the worst, most vulnerable moment. A natural part of healing comes from exploring, accepting, and embracing intimacy and passion, along with sexuality that's appropriate for you as a survivor. Your self-confidence and acceptance will return over time.

Here are some tips and ideas about sex and intimacy during and after cancer.

- **Cancer doesn't ruin relationships.** Statistics show that very few committed relationships end because of scars or other body changes. Divorce rates are the same for people with or without a cancer history. Talking openly about your fears and concerns helps you both stay positive and avoid inaccurate assumptions or misconceptions. Often, partners have the same concerns, but avoid talking about them to protect each other. Your intimacy begins with honest communication.
- **Intimacy, passion, and love are not the same as sex.** Intimacy comes from trust and courage and the sharing of who you really, truly are. Trust fosters passion. Passion is shown with a glance, a touch, and through caring. Trust and passion can create incredible intimacy, with or without sex.
- **Change your perspective.** For many survivors, the changes we see as we look at ourselves are insignificant to others. You've probably loved, or are attracted to, someone who's not perfect physically. How would you respond to someone if the situation were reversed?

Whether single or in a committed relationship, many breast cancer survivors report feeling closer to their significant partners, and have found the intimacy created by the experience enriched their lives.

The healing power of releasing emotions.

The emotions that mark your experience so far are part of the story of your life, and your experience with cancer. These feelings are the truth of where you are right now. There's no right or wrong, just normal human emotions. As you go through your treatment, and begin the transition into your *new normal*, some of these feelings will get left behind and new ones will take their place.

"I was always there to lend a hand or an ear, thinking I did not need it in return. Cancer made me realize a healthier way to be. I reached out and allowed family, friends and professionals to help me. By expressing my feelings and fears through journaling, talking, prayer, and meditation, I am able to release the negative, focus on the positive and make room for the healing. I now live in gratitude, truth, and faith—not in fear."

– Susan Zaret
diagnosed age 43/current age 44
lymphoma
chemotherapy

Writing or speaking the truth about what's happening to you is one of your most powerful tools to reduce fear and stress.

"I don't want to share my feelings about what's happening to me," a recently diagnosed patient told me. "I just want to be left alone."

"I understand," I replied, and paused. "Why should I have to think about a bunch of words like fear, death, cancer, and pain?" Her voice was louder, "I am so angry that this is happening to me. It's just not fair. What will my family do if I die? Or can't work?" Her voice shook and then she burst into sobs. After several minutes she finally wiped her tears away and looked up.

"How do you feel now?" I asked. Amazingly, she smiled at me through her tears. "I finally admitted that I'm more afraid for my family than I am about myself. It's such a relief. I'm not happy, but I will get through this."

Sharing the honest, gut-wrenching truths behind your fears, with yourself or with others feels better than holding them inside. Ongoing release of your very normal and natural emotions reduces stress and increases your ability to manage your experiences. Express your feelings regularly by writing or talking to yourself or others. Listen to your body. Right now, if your body wants to scream, laugh, cry, shout, dance, sing, or shut down, it's sending you a message about what it needs to be healthy.