Cancer, Fear & Finding Your Spark: How to Feel Alive Again When Everything Changes Transcript

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Introduction and cancer diagnosis fears

Stephanie James is such a honor. Such a pleasure to have you on this segment. You're somebody that is a thought leader and finding that spark within. And I couldn't really find a better group of people that are needing this and than our audience to.

Stephanie's, thank you so much for being with me. Thank you Michael. It's a joy to be here with you. Well, Stephanie, so here I want you to kind of imagine someone just told that I have cancer and there's all these things going through their head, and I going to die.

What does this mean? My children. Yeah. I want to see my grandchildren, my spouse. What treatment? All these. What if I make the wrong decision? Everyone thinks that I got to do everything just perfect.

What really goes on in there? What happens psychologically, you know, when all of a sudden that kind of sense of safety disappeared because we have a structured life, and then all of a sudden that just seems to blow up in their face.

Yes. And of course, I mean, our brain, which is naturally scanning the environment for anything that feels like a threat when we get something like a cancer diagnosis, it goes into full alert and everything that felt predictable, everything that felt knowable all of a sudden, all that certainty that we like to feel like, like we have we have a brain that thrives on predictability.

And all of a sudden, things don't feel predictable anymore. And I want to share with you and your audience that, you know, I went through this cancer journey with my aunt, with my grandmother, and just a year ago with one of my closest girlfriends.

And so this this all is very near and dear to my heart. And I remember how disorienting it was for all of them. And so even though it's incredibly uncomfortable when we first that lands with us, there is also a part of that that's absolutely normal, because there is no longer the old sense.

I've heard women say there was my life before the diagnosis and now my life after. Yeah. And so yeah, so just really acknowledging that is actually a normal first response that we go into that fight or flight because our brains, like, I don't have any kind of way of looking at this.

There's no format. My brain doesn't know what this looks like. There's nothing from the past that would give me that template of how to move forward. And so just those things alone can really put us into a state of anxiety.

And the challenge that obviously becomes, you know, when you're in a situation that you're just unfamiliar with and it is the stakes are so high when you're in that position, you know that that's how you're feeling.

And a lot of times, and we think that following or listening to the fear and having the fear guide you in your decision making. I mean, that kind of becomes like a default, you know, because that's your survival mechanism.

And so to kind of shift away from having fear being the decider to you being then the person guiding, you know, what needs to take place. I mean, that that's got to be hard.

Yeah. This is not something that you just make a decision like. I don't want to focus on fear and that works. This is something that actually is going to take.

It's building a new muscle. It's cultivating new resources that help release back in automatically. I think what happens to so many people is they start playing the what if game.

And so we go down all of these roads that are catastrophizing our experience. And one of the things that when I work with people, I help them to do is to reel themselves back in to the present moment.

And how can we resource ourselves in this present moment so we are able to make better decisions about how we want to move forward?

Fear, identity, and the spark within

Yeah. And then the challenge is that when you get the diagnosis, all of a sudden it becomes this identity shift that an individual is doing. You're shifting away.

I mean, it used to be that, you know, I'm the dad. I'm you know, this worker. I'm the mom. I'm grandpa. Grandma. I mean, you have these. You have an identity that you're used to.

And then. But the diagnosis all of a sudden, you know, that identity in some way shifts. And how do we stop the diagnosis from kind of taking over our city and who we are and who we felt, you know, strong and safe?

And I think of it, Michael, a lot like if we were introducing ourselves to someone, we wouldn't shake their hand and say, I am cancer. And, you know, this is this is actually something I use as a model several times with my clients.

It when it becomes our entire identity, yes, we're losing who we truly are. It is a part of us, but it is not the definition of who we are. And so coming to that place where, yes, I have to deal with this.

Yes, it's going to be a lot of effort and energy and focus. And yet I think one of the things that can really help a lot of the people that I've worked with is how do we again cultivate that inner knowingness that, yes, we were these roles, mom, dad, this earth sees me, mom, sister, grandmother.

And we may still be that we can be with those roles, but there's something also within us. And that's what I call the spark. That is the essence of who we are.

And at times like this, it becomes more important than ever that we get in touch with that, a essential essence that truly is us. That is more the definition of who we are beyond roles, beyond diagnosis.

And I think that is so important because that I can, sir, puts us essentially with our backs against the wall where we have to look at things, you know, so much harder in regards to who we are, our relationships.

And you know what? We believe in our purpose. And it really becomes a moment of real that. And I see that again and again with patients. They say that cancer was one of the greatest gifts that I could have not not that I wanted to go through all of this and choose to do it again.

But I see now on the other side, I just become a different person. And I know your new book, you know, your big, fat, juicy life and everything at after.

You know, you talk a lot about that in there, you know, to kind of when you confront something that's as seriously as cancer or death. And my question to you, I mean, what do you feel this can actually teach us about how to live when when you are in that position?

Yes, such a great question, because it is part of what the book is about. The book is about befriending death, which I know may sound like a really huge order or something that sounds.

We could not do that. It's also about befriending the present moment of whatever shows up. So it doesn't mean that the cancer is terminal by any means.

And when we're able to say, okay, this isn't the end, whatever is happening here, it's not the end. It's just the next chapter in our Book of Eternity.

However, that turns out that is actually can help us so much because when we are able to say, okay, yeah, this is my journey, whatever this is, and if I can just be in the present moment again and be present to it's unfolding, then the present moment becomes sacred.

We can step out of that fear, and we can truly learn how to make peace with life and death. And this continued cycle, when we bring ourselves to this moment and say, okay, how do I now go with then how do I find that place where I am connected to that eternal spark that is, again, my true identity and that becomes, you know, such a challenge and all for my, you know, for patients I encounter is that they step, they live a life essentially thinking that whatever today is, it's exactly what it's going to be tomorrow, the day after.

So they feel that it is that continuum. We have unlimited tomorrows, essentially. And you're not recognizing the importance of this moment and the power in this moment.

And that is that kind of awareness, you know, that we that a lot of people then are forced to finding. Yeah. When you preciate that, you know, maybe tomorrow is not going to be here.

You know, maybe I won't be here a year from now, you know, how can I make this moment? You know, the moment that really I treasure, you know, waking up and breathing today and seeing the laughter of my children today.

And that is. That's so it's such a hard shift to do when you're faced with something so stark. Yes, yes. And I want to speak to that insane. Again. It's not about just a thought and a decision, okay?

I'm not going to be scared. We have to do some practices. Number one, I think one of the helpful things can be practices that help interrupt that loop that we can get in.

That's the fear loop and the anxiety loop that's like, oh my God, everything's over you. My life is ruined or whatever that is. That becomes this negative thought loop.

And so there's specific practices that we can do. There's so many things that we can do to be that pattern interrupt to have that pattern interrupt.

Living in the present and befriending death

So I teach my clients a lot. I'll just share a couple very simplistic things, but they truly help us to come back into our bodies and into the present moment.

It can be as simplistic, Michael, as humming. Now. It's not just walking around your house humming. It's having an intentional time where you sit and you take a deep breath in, and then you hum for as long as you can hold that breath.

And you do that about six times now, humming again. How simplistic. But the research behind it, if you read the book, The Humming Effect, it's profound because what starts happening is you are releasing dopamine, you're releasing oxytocin.

There's a resonance within your nasal passages that actually, it's amazing how it brings you again, right to this moment. So a very that's a simple what I call a brain hack to bring us back to this moment.

And also for people that that may or may not know heart math. That is a wonderful pattern in a rut and in a nutshell, and I would invite people to go to where you can watch a two minute video, and that's all this takes, but it's coming into your heart.

It's putting your hand on your heart, dropping into your heart space. And imagine that you're breathing through your heart in and out. And what you may say to yourself, I like saying to myself slower and deeper as I relax my breath coming into a heart center.

And it's really what this is about is brain, heart coherence. And when we're in that coherence, we just drop into this relaxed state. And so as you're doing that breath, drop it into your heart.

Then you bring to mind a time where you had an elevated emotion. And this is elevated emotion in the positive way. So you want to think of a time where something was meaningful or joyful.

I remember the last time I was practicing this with a group. What came to my mind automatically was my cousin's wedding 20 years ago, where my grandfather was dancing with all of this, you know, and it was this wonderful moment looking around the room, seeing my family in joy.

And I was like, oh my gosh, that just my heart starts, you know, our hearts really do just it's like something is just radiating through it. And then the simplistic practice from that is to start then.

Okay. Once I have that activated, I'm going to send that energy out. I'm going to send that love, that joy out. Imagine it going to your friends and loved ones.

You may continue to spread that feeling. Imagine it going to people in your community. It might be the person that sacks your groceries, or the person that hands you your coffee in the morning and you continue spreading it out.

And as it continues, you imagine it's just it's like it's just reverberating and it's just going all through the world and then coming right back to you and nestling in your heart.

And again, this this can be a two minute practice. And when we're in it, we are not in the what if game. We're not in the fear. We're not in that anxiety.

And that's those are just a couple of the simplistic ways we can start to resource ourselves and bring ourselves to the present moment, which to what you said, we can say, oh my gosh, there's a beautiful sunrise today.

There is, you know, I get to see my beautiful child and they're laughing or playing. And those are the things I think that are really essential. Yeah.

And I mean just the miracle of us breathing and I mean that everything is like universe God you know, just conspire for our benefit to be able to take the next breath.

I mean it's what a marvelous thing that miracle is. And I think just getting to preach how beautiful life is. And, you know, obviously when you recognize that, you know, you may not you when you face something like cancer, obviously cancer doesn't mean death.

And I want everyone to understand that, but it's just one of those common thoughts that ends up in people's minds when they get that diagnosis, because it's so big.

So it is important to understand that, yes, diagnosed with cancer, but there's so many people that are currently living with cancer, living post cancer.

And so just a diagnosis in itself does not mean you know that anyone is going to to die. It just means that all of a sudden you're in a position where you're looking at life differently and where you're you're facing something that is sometimes feels bigger than you.

But the key is, you know, we're not talking about just just be positive and be happy and think everything's going to be, you know, the key is to yes, you are dealing with fear.

Yes. You're may be scared, angry, exhausted. All of these things are going on and honoring those emotions at the same time. While you're in those while you're in that space, then utilizing these tools to empower yourself so that these emotions do not become you and become bigger than you.

But these are things that you are able to move through rather than push away and and try to avoid. That's it, that's it.

Breathwork and heart coherence practices

So when someone you know minds raising at 2:00 in the morning, you know, thinking about, you know, worrying about their, you know, scan tomorrow or what my lab is going to get or treatment or finances or whatever it is, you know, so this tool that you just gave them.

Yeah, that the humming and the connecting and bringing positive things, that is a tool that is really powerful at that moment for them. Yes. It are there other things that there are other things that you feel is, is really other tools that you feel can be powerful for them during that moment in their lives? Yes.

One of the things I think that's really important is if you are spinning in bed, get out of bed. If we do a shift, if we stay there and spend, it is more likely we are going to stay there and spend.

And so I invite people to get up. Just go sit in a chair. You can keep the lights off. It's not about, you know, you don't want to stimulate yourself as far as looking at a phone or having lights on.

And one of the things that I find really helpful, because we do have these minds that are starting to spend all these different scenarios, is you can have a very simplistic saying, or some people call it a mantra.

It doesn't have to be a spiritual mantra. It can be as simplistic as I am. Love and love is in me. I am love and love is in me, or all is well and all is well, and all will be well.

Now, you know, we might start arguing with that if we have cancer and say, well, I don't know if all will be well and you can, you can use again, it could be just a word.

It might just be peace. It might be peace. I remember, you know, my father, who was a transcendentalist, he did, you know, twice a day did transcendental meditation.

And one of the things he would do is his loop was for him because it was spiritual, he would say, about love and being connected to God. Okay, so I am in God, and God is in me.

That's what the loop would say. I am in God and God is in me. And that was what kept his mind. And it's okay if thoughts come in because thoughts will come in.

It's just gently breathing and bringing yourself back to that phrase. And as you do that, it's like we learn. We're starting to just train our system, that just because we're thinking it doesn't mean that's what we have to focus on.

And we don't need to go down that rabbit hole, because that loop just continues to create that anxiety. So it's bringing ourselves again to the present moment, to our breath.

And breathwork is a great way to to do this pattern interrupt. And it can again, these aren't difficult things in and of themselves. They can be difficult for us to remember it to use.

And once we do, they're incredibly helpful. And again, it can be breathing in to the count of seven and then breathing out to the count of nine. You want to have the exhalation longer than the inhalation.

And what you're doing though, as you're counting, you're keeping your mind on something else besides the worrying thoughts, and you're bringing that just sense.

Because what happens? And I know you know this, Michael, when we start feeling anxious, when we start feeling stressed, we're only breathing in the top of our lungs and the filaments that bring all that oxygenated air to.

We're not accessing it. There's not a lot of filaments in the top of our lungs. So when we're anxious, we're breathing in a shallow way. And then the signal to our brain, the message is, I'm not safe, because when do we breathe really shallow?

When we're scared. So by just taking these intentional again, they can be gentle, soft breaths, but you're breathing in slowly and then releasing even more slowly.

You're accessing all those filaments which are concentrated in the lower parts of our lungs. So then the message we can notice this too. Well, the message to the brain is I'm calm and relaxed.

Everything's safe. When I breathe deeply. Things are good, things are okay. And then what happens? People notice a lot of times, well, I was really cold before when I was anxious.

And it's because our blood vessels are constricted. You can think of it almost like we're just holding on like this. And once we are able to take those deep breaths and bring ourselves back into this more relaxed state, our capillaries open, the blood's flowing again.

We can feel warm. We start to feel relaxed. So that would be another couple of ways that I think are really helpful. I love that because essentially when you're in that survival state, then you can simulate with your body safety.

And by simulating and breath like you're saying, it's such a powerful tool to breathe in a way so that the body feels safe and then the mind can then follow.

And then all of a sudden, instead of being in that fear state where you're thinking somebody's going to attack you, where you are not detoxifying, you're not absorbing nutrients, you're not regenerating, your immune system is not very effective.

You know, you're shifting from that fear state to a feeling safe state where all of a sudden the immune system has them being able to be intelligent and be able to recognize friend versus foe, cancer cell versus your cell, and then also being able to clear out the the that tumor microenvironment that is toxic, you know, we're able to then start to detoxify and then bring nutrients into the cells, bring oxygen to the cells.

I mean, it's such a it seems so simple and it is so simple. But the impact of what you just told us is so powerful. It's so, so important. Yeah. These are the essential questions and the essential things that I think that are, are so important.

What you just shared right there as we do these things, it's actually, in the end what's going to help our entire system, our physiology, to deal with what's happening at the moment.

And one of the things that I see is that challenge with the lot of patients that are diagnosed or even after, and sometimes when you're then a friend or a loved one is diagnosed that it becomes you've you lose almost your purpose and that, you know, you've talked about that spark.

You know that what what is lighting you up inside. So when someone comes to you and maybe this says, you know, Stephanie, you know, I've got the state for cancer.

Nothing lights me up. Now, you know, where would that where would that individual start?

Handling anxiety, grief, and emotional release

I mean, how do they start that journey? Because, you know, they just feel kind of dead inside in a way. Yes. I think part of it is also where you are at, because I think part of the cancer journey also holds with it a grief journey as

well, and that it's okay.

I think that's the other piece that's important to speak to, is that whatever emotion or feeling is coming up in the moment, it's not that you focus on it and you stay with it and you go deeper, as we said, into the rabbit hole.

I think instead, what is just to acknowledge this is what's here. As the wonderful Michael Singer writes in his Untethered Soul, he speaks about suffering is when we want this moment to be anything other than what it is.

So it doesn't mean that we say, oh, I'm joyful that I have cancer. I'm joyful for this diagnosis. It's saying, I don't want to add to my suffering by saying, no, no, no, I don't want to feel this way.

I don't want this to be happening. And all that resistance. It's like pushing a beach ball underwater. And as we know, as we push it and push it, this pressure builds and eventually it kind of pops back up and smacks us in the face. So.

So what can be essential, I think is a starting place to say, yep, this is what's here. You can breathe into the moment. And I think then you can begin to actually, this again might sound counterintuitive, but you're befriending your experience in the moment.

And that's what a lot of times I will help people to do by instead of resisting the emotion that's there, don't define it. Don't go into the story about it and instead start noticing, okay, where is it registered in my body?

And I'll have people go through. Dan Siegel, the great neuropsychologist, says naming is taming. So if we name the emotion and again, instead of saying I am sad or I am anxious, it's I'm experiencing this emotion right now and we can give that emotion almost an object.

I think of it as I have people go into it and define it. It's like, how big is it? If you had to describe what's the shape? If it had a texture, what would the texture be if it had you start going through your senses?

If it had a color, if it had a sound, if it had a taste, a temperature. And once it's defined, you really start feeling like, oh, it's like a using this as an example, like a grapefruit in my heart.

And then this is actually because I'm a trauma specialist. I do a lot of things with eMDR and this is an MD technique where then you bring in it's called the light stream technique.

Whatever is your concept of source, the divine higher power, whatever that energy is for you. And you imagine that light coming straight through the top of your head and coming into that space, going in, around and through, permeating and penetrating each and every cell.

And in that place people start to notice, wow, it's dissipating that that energy, that feeling is dissipating. And you keep bringing in the light streams until it feels like you feel that it's really released.

And then you send a light stream through and you just imagine it infusing each and every cell with this loving, healing energy coming through until I love the image of all these little lights going on, all these billions of lights coming on inside of us as it's being infused with this loving, healing energy.

Yeah, I love that. That's so powerful. And that's the thing, is that becoming like the observer of the moment and, you know, by creating, making cancer, making the emotions, you know, giving it structure that allows that it doesn't become this kind of big thing that's just floating around and we don't feel like it can attack us any time because we it's like trying to grasp air, you know, if we're able to give it structure and texture and, you know, involve our senses to it, then all of a sudden it doesn't look so overwhelming.

Yeah. It just looks like, well, I can handle things that I can see that I can and that I can smell, that I can touch, that I can, you know, I can handle that and I can process that.

And, and now you know that this is what it is. And you can also put that on the shelf, you know, feel like, you know, you got to deal with it later at some point.

But then bringing them light and energy into that space, you know, rather than that. Yeah. Whatever the fear or, you know, guilt or shame or whatever motion that may be there that's overwhelming you. Yes.

And I think two things. One, one of them is an essential, I think, for all of us, healing balm can be just being in nature. And people will say to me, well, I live in a big city.

So I said, yes, go outside and just have five minutes, three minutes of sky time. Because if we look up in the sky, something is changing at all moments and it really does help connect us to something bigger than ourselves.

So if we can go out and just look with a sense of curiosity, with a sense of wonder, that can also help take us out of the present moment of fear or present moment of that anxiety that everything our world can seem like it gets very, very small during these times of diagnosis or treatment.

And so it's ways of expanding ourselves. And if you can go for a walk, if you have time where you can sit actually in nature, go sit by a creek, go sit if you have access to even a field, a park, and you're just pausing and breathing that in and just noticing that connection.

Because nature is such a great teacher as well, that we have cycles. There are cycles in our lives, just as there are cycles of nature where things are born, and then they die and then they're reborn.

And it doesn't mean that we are necessarily going to die with a camp diagnosis. It means this might be a season of our lives where then something a past self, a past idea about ourselves, then that passes away as well.

And yet something renewed, something can be reborn. That's a way of being in the world that we could not have imagined. You mentioned in the beginning that we can't always realize the gifts, and there are gifts to this.

And I think that brings me to my second thing.

Nature, Rumi, and finding meaning in change

And I will not quote this perfectly by any means, but what? What am I? Go to poems and I will pull it up, and I read it to my clients and I don't have it memorized, but it's the guest house by Rumi, who was a 13th century Sufi poet.

And the poem is so beautiful. It's called The Guest House. And my horrible prayer phrase I will say, but the essential message is this. You know, he says this being human is a guest house every day, a new arrival, a meanness, a depression, a joy.

Something comes as an unexpected visitor. And then he goes on to say, but welcome them, meet them at the door laughing. Even if they sweep your home empty of its furniture, they may be clearing you out for some new delight.

So the shame, the guilt, the malice again, he said, when we welcome the men we don't know which has been sent as a guide from beyond love that I love that.

Yeah. That's that's. Yeah. And that's the thing is that. Yeah, every day we, we create these judgments on what we experience saying this is good, this is bad.

And essentially life just flows. It just does its does its own thing. And and if we tried to fight it or resist it, you know, it's like fighting or resisting a river.

Yeah. It's just going to deplete our energy. It is going to frustrate us. And, and and instead just being in the moment, like you're saying, you know, and accepting the gifts because we don't know, you know, how they are gifts to us yet.

But like you're saying, I mean, even clearing out all the furniture, you know, that may be what we're needing and then open ourselves up for a new face in life, a new, exciting way of looking at things to connect with, with God, to connect with, you know, the beauty of nature, whatever that may be.

You know it. It will give us an opportunity, you know, as we flow with life and death. You know, like you said, nature, you know, nature comes and you know, trees come and go.

But they are, you know, nature still exist. We're connected to that same circle of life. You know, that nature that we see out there is just reflecting are essential nature.

Yeah, I love that. And so if if you have kind of as we are finalizing, if we have a person watching us right now, they're scared. Maybe diagnosed yesterday waiting for a scan.

Yeah. If you could sit beside that person just for a couple of minutes, what would be your kind of final? What would be what you want them to know about their life right now?

What would you tell them? I think what what came to my mind right then, Michael, is what? Honestly, they're the words at the bottom of my film poster of my first film, when sparks ignite.

And the first thing to acknowledge at the bottom of that holster, there's three words and it says your period. Healing period matters. Period. And to let that person know, first of all, that they are an essential golden thread in the tapestry of humanity.

And so that that they matter, that their energy, their life, their well-being, all of it matters and their healing matters. And that might be physiologically and it might be emotionally.

It might not just be in the body. So how can we move into healing in this moment and we can create that together again? We might create that through breath.

We might create that through a simple meditation.

Final encouragement and how to connect

We might do that by just right now coming into our hearts and taking up residence for a few moments. I love the phrase, Michael. I would invite this person to breathe themselves back into their body, to take up residence behind their own eyes, because what we start doing is we start sending all of our energy and all the things, and everything's going out.

And so reeling ourselves, breathing ourselves back into our body in this moment. And then that does become that pinnacle point where the power that we have is bringing ourselves to the present moment.

And we can do that, and we can really touch that essence that that can get covered up. It feels like situations and circumstances cover up that spark that we are.

And then that's our work. How do we excavate that spark that's always there? It can't be dimmed. It can't be put out. So it's how can I access that in this moment?

And it's cultivating that practice, that muscle. Thank you. Stephanie, thank you so much for for what you bring to the world, what you how can people connect with you?

I know you have two books out. You have podcasts, you have movie, you do coaching you do. I mean, you just do so many things. How can they connect with you?

The easiest way to connect with me is to go to my website, which is Stephaniejames.world. And so my books are there. There's a trailer for the first film.

You can learn about my retreats, you can have coaching, sign up for coaching. And one of the wonderful things is a free gift on the website, which is a ten minute shock meditation that I have people that have gotten a hold of me, clients that come back two years later and say, this is my go to every morning, because it is that practice of coming back into your body and then you're going through for people that don't know, chakras are just energy centers throughout our body that we can focus on.

That really brings our attention internal. And again, it's one of the ways we can really bring ourselves into this present moment. So that's there at Stephanie James Stop World as well.

Wonderful. And yeah, your newest book that just came out, your big, fat, juicy life and everything after. I mean that to me it is so obviously your old your the previous book Becoming Fierce.

Yeah. Both of them are things that I, I feel everyone should have on their bookshelves. So Stephanie, thank you so much for, for being here with me today.

Thank you Michael. It's an honor to be blessings. Thanks.