

WORKSHEET 7 · CHAPTER SEVEN · WHEN CANCER BECOMES CHRONIC

Expanding Your Life

When you can't shrink your symptoms — what if you expand your life around them instead?

There's a moment in chronic illness that feels like a breaking point. When you realize this might not be something you can fix. Not something you just push through. Not something you can outwork or outsmart.

It might just... be.

And that realization can feel devastating. Because if your symptoms don't go away, then what happens to your life?

For a long time, I believed the goal was to shrink the illness — to reduce symptoms enough that I could get back to who I was before. But eventually I realized something: if I waited to feel better before I lived my life, I might never live it at all.

What if I expand my life around my symptoms instead of waiting for them to disappear?

STEP 1

Identify Your Current Limits

Be honest with yourself. Not your old limits. Not what you should be able to do. What is true right now.

What are my current physical capacities?

What are my current physical limitations?

What activities trigger symptoms?

What time of day is hardest?

How long can I be upright, or out of the house?

STEP 2

Assess the Other Four Realms

Along with accepting your physical capacities and limits, it's important to do the same for your mental, emotional, social and spiritual situation.

What emotions do I regularly experience because of my physical state?

What thoughts do I have about my chronic issues or my cancer?

How is my current physical state affecting my relationships?

What do I believe spiritually — or, if that word doesn't fit, what do I believe about my worth, my purpose, or the meaning of my life?

STEP 3

Ask, “What Can I Do?”

As you accept your limitations, it's equally important to recognize your remaining strengths. You might not be able to go on long hikes as you once did — but you might still be able to go on short walks. You may not be able to return to life exactly as it was, but you can still build a meaningful life within your new reality.

What do I *want* to do that my body can still do?

What do I *need* to do that my body can still do?

How might I expand my life, even if my symptoms stay the same?

STEP 4

Build Life Within Your Capacity

Instead of asking “What can I get back to?” ask “What is still possible inside my current limits?” That might look like:

- Shorter outings
- Modified routines
- Rest built into everything
- Different ways of connecting

Not less meaningful. Just different.

STEP 5

Redefine Strength

I used to believe strength meant pushing through, doing, and enduring more. Now I’m learning that strength can also look like:

- Stopping before you crash
- Saying no
- Leaving early
- Resting when you need to
- Practicing self-care and self-compassion

Strength isn’t always forward motion. Sometimes it’s gentle restraint.

What would strength look like for me this week?

STEP 6

Make Room for Both

You don't have to choose between:

- Grief *or* gratitude
- Hope *or* disappointment
- Strength *or* struggle
- Faith *or* fear

You can hold both. You can say:

"This is not the life I wanted."

And also, "I'm still here."

You can grieve what's been lost. And still create something meaningful inside what remains.

What am I holding both of right now?

A Gentle Reminder

You are not failing at life. You are living inside a body that has changed. And that requires a different kind of strength. A quieter kind. A more honest kind.

Not the kind that pushes through — but the kind that learns how to stay.

This worksheet accompanies Chapter Seven of *Reluctant Warrior: A Memoir & Breast Cancer Emotional Survival Guide* by Dr. Christina Hibbert. It is a reflective exercise, not therapy or medical care. If it brings up more than you expected, that makes sense — please consider bringing it to someone who can sit with you in it.