

New Year Reminders

By Dr. Linda Miles

One of my most memorable New Years—and New Year lessons—occurred one year when I served a group of hospital patients as a visiting therapist. These men and women were characterized by their vibrancy, humor, and gratitude, emanating a warmth and camaraderie you felt the instant you were in their midst. You wouldn't believe they all had terminal cancer.

When I first walked into the room where we were gathered to meet and eat, one of the women laughed good-naturedly and exclaimed, "Oh my gosh, she's wearing white!" Later, she explained that she initially thought I was a fellow patient instead of a new facilitator, which is why my clothing stood out to her.

None of the women in the group wore white because they wore dark pen marks which indicated that they were marked for chemotherapy; they forewent white clothing because the marks would show through it. I was amazed at this woman's acceptance of her condition, the nonjudgmental attitude toward her body, and her easy humor.

These wonderful people reminded me of my friend, Lucy. We have been friends forever. We've shared countless memories throughout childhood, boy-crazy adolescence, weddings, young adulthood, childbirth, career challenges, parenting, and grandparenting. Lucy exemplifies the phrase "it is not MY pain; it is OUR pain." Even though she has stage four lung cancer and is in nearly constant pain, she shows more compassion than most people I know.

What do Lucy and my group of patients teach us? Why are their lessons so relevant for a New Year—and every day?

- Gratitude for life's blessings and opportunities are what help us build an emotional bank account. When pain occurs—and it inevitably will, as a part of life—we can make emotional withdrawals without overdrafts.
- Acceptance of life's circumstances does not mean we like what is happening. It means we can be realistic optimists and use our time and energy for problem solving instead of wishful thinking. By focusing on what matters and what we love most, we can nurture our hearts and others' by being better instead of bitter.

- Giving to others is a way to feel better. When we give to others with compassion, the chemicals oxytocin and dopamine kick-start positive feelings.
- Forgiveness allows us to find inner peace and makes space for healthier emotions and energy. Cultivating anger generates cascades of chemicals of cortisol and adrenaline that wear us down. Holding on to anger is like drinking cyanide and expecting someone else to die.

When we accept that our days are limited, we can make the most of every day by focusing each morning on that day's three most important personal priorities. Make each day count! Nobody guarantees tomorrow. Thus, it is important to remember to deliberately look for joy even though and when there is suffering around us. Even if there are dark places in our brain or body, we can deliberately look for ways to share joy, and can make someone else's day—and ours.

Celebrate the moment. Extend compassion. Give thanks every day. New Year's Day isn't a one-time practice of gratitude. It is a reminder of what we should be doing every day: priming our brains to seek out love and light.

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