



**You finished
treatment,
now what?**

Thriving after cancer treatment:



A natural medicine roadmap

By Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP

You'd think the last day of chemo or radiation treatment would be a time to rejoice and celebrate. But for many cancer patients, the last day of treatment is soon followed by a sense of dread and despair. The fighting stance and the rallying cries end. The outpouring of support slows. It's on to "life as usual," which is not easy if you don't feel well, and when medical "active surveillance" seems to be served up with a hefty portion of stress and anxiety. Many cancer patients and

survivors feel at a loss. They need help and support—to reverse collateral damage from cancer care and to strategize ways to prevent recurrence.

That's why I wrote a new book, *You Finished Treatment, Now What? A Field Guide for Cancer Survivors*. (See review on page 44.) It is primarily devoted to lifestyle and natural medicine approaches aimed at reversing collateral damage and preventing recurrence—supported by evidence-based informa-

tion. Whole-person approaches, such as Ayurvedic medicine, acupuncture, and homeopathy, are also introduced.

In my more than 30 years of experience, I have found homeopathy to be beautifully helpful for cancer survivors with a wide range of symptoms, varying levels of overall health, and unique personalities and temperaments. In this article, I delve further into this subject and illustrate how I use homeopathy with cancer survivors/thrivers.

5 Reasons to seek help

People who seek my help after conventional cancer care typically have needs that fall into the following five categories:

- 1 Mopping up from conventional care.**
Surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and other cancer treatments are hard on the body, for good reason—they have an important job to do. *And* they can leave patients with all manner of symptoms.
 - 2 Addressing acute and first-aid challenges.**
Pharmaceutical prescriptions are routinely offered to survivors for common conditions, but the more drugs we add to a prescription list, the more potential side effects we encounter. Gentle natural medicines, including homeopathy, often provide adequate prevention or treatment for acute and first-aid conditions.
 - 3 Treating psycho-emotional symptoms.**
Conventional cancer treatment, however kindly it is delivered, is often traumatic, and the way it takes a person out of their day-to-day life and comfort zone is almost universal. Many survivors struggle mightily with anxiety, depression, irritability, and other difficult emotions. A remedy to help shore up the emotions and support the processing of that traumatic experience is a gift that homeopathy offers patients in need.
 - 4 Addressing fatigue, brain fog, insomnia, and more.**
It's the cancer process itself, as well as the treatments, that can lead to whole-person complaints such as these. We use homeopathy to good effect for many of these ongoing challenges; the holistic way we choose remedies matches these often difficult-to-address complaints.
 - 5 Addressing other underlying chronic ailments.**
For many people, cancer is only one of several serious diagnoses. Quality of life is often impacted by other chronic ailments, so using homeopathy can channel healing potential toward reversing or slowing concurrent disease processes and may help a person to be on less medication. Also, certain chronic ailments put people at risk for further cancer, which is another good reason to use homeopathy.
- While these are the five main reasons cancer survivors seek help, most people have more than one reason for their appointment. But prioritizing what is most limiting to my patient at that moment in time helps me better aim my remedy correctly. This same philosophy of practice and application is true, regardless of the person or their complaint, across my practice. I figure out where I am aiming the remedy before I start! That way, the results will reflect a more focused and pertinent outcome.

The following vignettes illustrate how I use homeopathy with cancer survivors/thrivers seeking help in the five categories mentioned above.

Alicia: Mopping up collateral damage

Forty-five-year-old Alicia came to see me six months after finishing treatment for early breast cancer. She'd had a lumpectomy and radiation on her left side, which caused lymphedema (tissue swelling) in her left arm. Lymphedema commonly occurs after lymph nodes are removed or damaged during cancer treatment. Alicia was taking advantage of state-of-the-art manual therapy for lymphedema but, unfortunately, was not seeing much progress.

Alicia was also suffering with a full-body rash that was red, slightly raised, and itchy. The rash was worse when she became warm, especially after a shower, while in bed, or if she perspired while walking.

Alicia came from an impressive line of long-lived people and had taken good care of herself. Except for the breast cancer, she let me know she was quite healthy. She also had

a great attitude, telling me, "Look, bad things happen to good people," and "I'm just going to get on with it and do what I can to live a healthy, long life, and enjoy my family." Alicia did not have any other chronic ailments.

In a situation like this, I try to determine whether the person's chief complaint (lymphedema) and general symptoms fit their constitutional state or not. If so, I would give Alicia a dose of her constitutional remedy. On the other hand, if Alicia's temperament had shifted from her usual one, if she had changes in her physical general symptoms and tendencies (e.g., thirst, appetite, temperature preference, etc.), and if the lymphedema did not fit her constitutional remedy, I would choose a more narrowly focused remedy aimed at the lymphedema.

Because this was my first meeting with Alicia, I posed my questions to enable me to understand whether or not such a constitutional shift had taken place. For instance, I asked if she tended to be more warm or chilly. She'd always been very warm-blooded, and she remained so. Was her sunny disposition typical for her, or was it new? It was not new. I asked about her food cravings and sleep position. They had not changed. When I asked about her itchy, red skin, Alicia spoke of her general tendency "to be rash-y" and described past skin outbreaks.

Because Alicia's temperament and physical general symptoms had not shifted after cancer treatment, I sought a broadly focused, constitutional remedy for her. Based on Alicia's sunny disposition and the nature of her discomfort, I considered the remedies *Medorrhinum*, *Belladonna*, and *Sulphur*. If Alicia needed *Medorrhinum*, I would have expected her history to have included mood swings and perhaps some wild behavior. If she needed *Belladonna*, I would have expected more inflammation with the lymphedema, as well as other examples of inflammation in her system.

Her optimistic outlook, her focus on moving forward and getting things done, her warm-blooded nature, her general good health, and her tendency to have skin rashes led me to prescribe the homeopathic remedy *Sulphur* 200c. This remedy also covered her lymphedema.

In addition to treating Alicia with homeopathy, I instructed her on how to use hydrotherapy to help with the lymphedema, using alternating hot and cold baths to her hands. I also advised her to eat an anti-inflammatory diet, and as much as possible, to insert stress management approaches into her busy life.

When Alicia returned to see me one month later, the swelling and range of motion in her arm were much improved. "I'm feeling good again!" she told me excitedly. The rash, while still visible, was fading and no longer itchy. Over the next couple of months, Alicia's rash disappeared, and her lymphedema was barely noticeable. Alicia was pleased with this improvement and has continued to see me off and on, as needed, for the past ten years. She has remained cancer-free, for which she is deeply grateful.

*Conventional cancer treatment, however kindly
it is delivered, is often traumatic.*

Rena: Acute and first-aid challenges

A long-time patient of mine, Rena came through treatment for colon cancer pretty well, only to suffer a bad concussion just a few months later. She slipped on ice and struck the back of her head. I knew her to be quick, smart, and engaging. But as soon as she entered my office, I could see that she was struggling.

Rena's main complaint related to her cognition: she felt like she couldn't concentrate on anything, could not think clearly, and could not have a normal conversation. She could not multi-task and felt like everything was happening in slow motion. She told me she felt "dull and out of it," and that was also how I experienced her. She said she preferred to lie in a dark, quiet room and not be bothered by anyone or anything.

In choosing a remedy for Rena, I first considered the most recent constitutional remedy she had responded to, to assess if it was still indicated—as I do with all my patients. Rena had responded well to the constitutional remedy *Natrum muriaticum* in the past, given to support her overall health, but

especially to relieve migraine headaches and menopause symptoms. I did not think Rena needed more *Natrum muriaticum* now, however, for one main reason: she had no headache. You could have a person do well with *Natrum muriaticum* and not have a headache, but not if they had struggled with headaches most of their life. If she had needed *Natrum muriaticum*, I would expect another stress (the fall) to trigger that familiar complaint, even if it had been well addressed by *Natrum muriaticum* previously. In addition, Rena's general demeanor had changed markedly, from quick and sharp to slow and dull, which told me she needed a different remedy.

Since Rena did not need her constitutional remedy, I aimed my remedy search at her acute case of concussion. The top remedies I consider for post-concussion syndrome are *Arnica montana*, *Nux moschata*, and *Helleborus*.

If Rena had needed *Arnica*, I would expect her to have the classic bruised sensations and a "send the doctor away" attitude with denial of her symptoms, because many who need

Arnica think they are fine, when they are not. But Rena did not fit that profile. If *Nux moschata* had been indicated, I would expect her to have excessive dryness accompanied by more out-of-body sensations.

Helleborus was the remedy most indicated because it fit Rena's new symptoms of dullness, slowness, inability to multi-task, and confusion after a head injury, as well as her desire to be alone and still. She took a dose of *Helleborus* 200c.

Rena returned to see me about a month later. "It's like a miracle!" she exclaimed. One week after taking *Helleborus*, she felt like "the cloud started to lift." And in the ensuing weeks, Rena regained much of her mental and communication capacity. She could then turn her attention to lifestyle and natural medicine approaches aimed at mitigating the side effects of her cancer care, which she'd been unable to do when feeling cognitively "out of it."

Cancer-related fatigue is often not proportional with exertion.

John: Psycho-emotional symptoms

John, who was treated for prostate cancer, came to me for help with a new symptom—depression. Robust at 70, John had experienced depression before, but not very often and usually triggered by a sad event, such as when his father died or after a big disappointment at work. John had tolerated his cancer treatments well, with the support of natural medicine approaches.

Like many men treated for prostate cancer, John was put on hormone suppressive medication after he completed radiation to the prostate area. As a result, John lost muscle mass and felt tired, unmotivated, and *seriously* irritable. He also complained of physical soreness and stiffness and being less flexible. I saw that as a metaphor for less flexibility and ease emotionally, too. Unable to do as much as he used to, losing his interest in and capacity for intimacy, and generally feeling aimless and lost, John arrived at my office in pretty rough shape. Nevertheless, his prognosis was good, and he had a strong desire to live.

We reviewed everything John had been through, from hearing the news of his diagnosis, to adjusting to his treatment schedule, to the loss of his previous capacity. We talked about disappointment, how it was largely related to expectation, and how shifting expectations for a while would probably help. At the very least, John was able to lay out all his concerns and feel heard. "That's a big relief in itself," he said.

Because we knew that John's hormone suppression would only be for another year, we set our sights on making the most of this year. I suggested a constitutional homeopathic remedy that matched John's temperament, his tendency for constipation, and his generally cranky demeanor. That kind of irritability, where his partner could do nothing right and his grown children were driving him crazy, is a hallmark of both *Lycopodium* and *Nux vomica*. For the former, it usually comes

from a place of feeling lesser or somehow inadequate. For the latter, irritability more commonly grows from the sheer need to be in control and to be right. People who need either of these remedies tend to be chilly and can have a wide range of digestive complaints, as was true of John. I chose *Lycopodium* for John because he was struggling with feelings of inadequacy and feeling like a lesser version of himself.

I also suggested that John take a high-potency B-vitamin complex to help with irritability, as B vitamins can support healthy brain function and moods. I recommended the botanical medicine ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) to help support his adrenal glands, as he described the unrelenting stress of the previous few years. We ordered food-sensitivity testing because I wondered if there was additional inflammation aggravating his other symptoms. As it turned out, John was strongly sensitive to both dairy and wheat, which comprised not a small part of his diet.

John took the remedy *Lycopodium* 200c and worked to wean himself off some of his beloved food and to find replacements, which, while not perfect, were acceptable. We plotted an appropriate exercise schedule that was not overly demanding, and I spoke with John about accepting some of his limitations, while encouraging him that he would likely build back up and feel better over time.

When John came back three months later, I could tell from his gait and facial expression that he was feeling better. His wife attested to his improved mood, and he reported easier digestion and elimination. I think it was the homeopathic remedy and the combination of approaches John adopted that helped improve his quality of life. "Being able to talk things through and make an attitude adjustment also helped immensely," John said.

Karl: Fatigue, brain fog, insomnia, and more

For many patients in my care, fatigue is one of the worst things about the whole cancer experience. Cancer-related fatigue is often not proportional with exertion, and it impacts so many aspects of life. It is also not ameliorated by sleep. Without enough energy, it's difficult to get anything done, to work, to take part in activities once enjoyed, to relate to family and friends, and to follow many of the lifestyle suggestions that can help ensure best health outcomes.

While the majority of cancer patients experience fatigue during treatment, about one-third of patients have cancer-related fatigue for months afterwards, even years. Some of my patients return to their pre-diagnosis energy level at some point after treatments have ended. For others, low energy remains an ongoing challenge, and their “new normal” includes insidious, debilitating fatigue, which negatively impacts quality of life.

At age 72, Karl came to see me after treatment for lung cancer. He'd had part of one lung removed, chemotherapy, and targeted radiation. After about eight months of treatment, he was absolutely exhausted. He was also having shortness of breath, something that was not new for him. As a life-long smoker, Karl was accustomed to getting out of breath easily.

Karl had always been quite sedentary and was even more so now. His fatigue was insidious, it was hard for him to do anything, from personal hygiene to work around the house. He felt most comfortable sitting in front of a fan on his couch. If he left the house, he took a small hand fan with him, as it was the one thing he felt helped his breathing. Karl also suffered with tremendous amounts of gas in his digestive tract and would belch and pass gas throughout the day, regardless

of what he ate. His wife described him as deeply lethargic and increasingly apathetic.

Several homeopathic remedies came to mind, including *China officinalis*, *Gelsemium*, and *Carbo vegetabilis*. Those needing *China* are often full of gas and can be exhausted, as Karl was. Their history usually includes loss of fluids (e.g., blood loss) as a trigger for health issues, along with heightened irritability—neither of which were true for Karl. *Gelsemium* certainly fit Karl's exhaustion, but if he needed this remedy, I would not have expected to see the yearning for air and the need to be fanned continuously. However, people who need *Carbo vegetabilis* do have the kind of “air hunger” and desire to be fanned that Karl had. This remedy is often helpful for sluggish, debilitated people who never fully recovered from a previous illness.

I gave Karl *Carbo vegetabilis* 200c, as well as actionable information about smoking cessation and a number of botanical medicines that help with respiratory health. There are many approaches to smoking cessation, and it is worth every effort and discipline to stop smoking, regardless of where someone is in the cancer continuum.

Karl had tremendous relief from *Carbo vegetabilis*. He was grateful that he could breathe better and take short walks in his neighborhood. He regained strength and some interest in life and was able to better enjoy his grandchildren and family. Karl was eventually able to reduce his smoking and no longer needed a fan around all the time. While his digestion was still imperfect, he was not as bloated and gassy, for which he was grateful.

Other chronic ailments

When a cancer survivor's quality of life is negatively affected by an underlying chronic illness, such as diabetes, migraine headaches, hypertension, gastroesophageal reflux (GERD), and the like, I approach their treatment as I would any other patient's, using homeopathy as well as natural medicine approaches. For examples, please see the many articles I've written on patients with these and other chronic conditions in *Homeopathy Today* archives found in Member Resources at HomeopathyCenter.org/membership-resources-login.

Improving life quality makes good sense!

Natural medicine, including homeopathy, cannot help every cancer survivor or every complaint, but I feel sad when I hear patients say, “Well, I'm lucky to be alive, I can live with this.”

Let's face it: we're all lucky to be alive! And quality of life matters, too. Using homeopathy with cancer survivors, for whatever complaints they may have, makes good sense! 💧

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