

THE *witnessing* PROJECT

FROM PASSIVE WITNESSING TO EFFECTIVE ACTION

A Guide for Volunteers to the Treatment Dedication Project Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.

My name is Kaethe Weingarten and I have been diagnosed and treated for cancer three times, in 1988, 1993 and 2003. I developed this program so that people who are undergoing cancer treatment can do something that is meaningful to them, to others and to the world. We tend to think that the treatment period is a time out of our lives. We think of ourselves as diminished and vulnerable. But, being in treatment may actually be a good time to consider what is important to us and to do something, however small, about what we care about deeply.

During my most recent round of treatment for cancer, I dedicated each radiation session to a person or cause whose work in the world I wanted to honor. I honored them by taking my treatment in their name. Preparing to dedicate the treatment, doing so at the time of the treatment itself, and communicating with my dedicatees about what their work meant to me was one of the most significant, hopeful and comforting experiences of my life.

I have prepared this guide to help you assist someone undergoing cancer treatment to dedicate the treatment. I believe that you will derive as much benefit from working on this project with the patient as the patient will derive. By participating in this project, you will join a national movement of dedication, embodying the belief that no act is too small, no person so diminished, that she or he cannot make an offering that matters. Thank you for your contribution.

This guide is intended to help you assist a cancer patient to dedicate his or her treatments to a worthy person or cause. Cancer treatment is often a disturbing, lonely, and uncomfortable time. Whether we are surrounded by loving support from family and friends or are alone in the world, we often lose a sense of meaning and purpose during this period. The disruption of normal routines and the difficulty of predicting how we will feel make daily life tough. Cancer treatment can be an overwhelming experience.

At the same time, many of us are aware that we are fortunate to live in a time and place in which potentially life-saving treatments are available to us. Knowing this softens the distress, but it does not erase it.

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This guide is a resource for volunteers who want to help cancer patients accomplish the goal of dedicating their cancer treatments. Cancer patients often feel diminished in their capacity to lead their lives, but yearn to do something that can make a positive difference. They may not have the energy, focus, or confidence to steer themselves through a meaningful project, but would welcome support to complete one. You can help a cancer patient with this dedication project, thereby contributing to her or his sense of well-being and accomplishment. The steps that I describe are suggestions, not prescriptions. There is no right or wrong way to dedicate.

1. Introductions

A. Introduce yourselves

Whether or not you know the patient, neither of you “know” each other in the context of this dedication project. Therefore, **introductions** make sense. If you have never met before or don’t know each other well, spend a few minutes, or more, sharing something about who you are, your interests, what is important to you. You might want to share where you live, or what you like to do. If you do know the person well, spend a few minutes sharing what is important to you at this moment.

B. Discuss why this project appeals to you

I think it is important to talk to each other about **why this project appeals to you**. The person you are working with, your friend or the patient you have been paired with at the treatment center, may be comfortable talking about herself or talking about her reasons for doing the project, or this may be difficult. You may need to ask the person questions to help him talk about his reasons for doing this project. Helping people talk about why they are doing this gives them an opportunity to feel connected to core beliefs and values. It usually makes people feel good to talk about themselves in this way.

In general, throughout this project, it will be preferable to ask questions that are in the form of open-ended prompts than in the form of probes or forced-choice questions. For example,

Prompts:

Was there something that struck a chord with you when you learned about the *Treatment Dedication Project*?

What is appealing to you about *the Treatment Dedication Project*?

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Rather Than,

Probes:

Are you doing this because you feel hopeless?

Or,

Forced-Choice Questions:

Are you hoping to feel better or more fulfilled after you dedicate your treatments?

2. Moving Through the *Guide to Dedicating Cancer Treatments*

The *Guide to Dedicating Cancer Treatments* is intended to provide a logically structured sequence to help people dedicate their cancer treatments. We all know, however, that we don't always think or operate logically. Read the guide a few times yourself. Try to absorb the intention of the guide. Here is another way of thinking about the different parts of the experience the guide is trying to help patients achieve.

Help people connect with a sense of purpose or meaning greater than themselves and their current emotional and physical state

Help people feel that they can make a difference

Turn helplessness into effective action

I am sure there are many ways of doing this. I chose dedicating treatments because I liked the idea of making my treatments serve "double duty": while they helped me, I also used them to help others.

The key elements in this project are to:

- Help someone figure out what they really care about
- Figure out who or what will represent this cause
- Help the person write a letter that explains what is important to the letter-writer and recognizes the person's or organization's contribution to the letter-writer's cause
- Keep the spirit of the dedication alive during the treatment period

It may take one session or it may take a few weeks for someone to work through this guide. The process should be open-ended. If you have limited time, let the patient know in the beginning what your time commitment can be.

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Because there are no right answers, and because when people are sick and tired, they have difficulty being creative, the patient may come to rely on you for a lot of suggestions. You want to help without imposing what you would do on the patient. For this to be successful, you want to think of yourself as a coach to someone who will end up doing the “performance” himself. However, in the process of working on this project together, it may have an impact on your life.

3. Managing Your Own Responses

By participating in this project with a cancer patient, you become a witness to that person’s experience. I have written a book on this subject, *Common Shock -- Witnessing Violence Every Day: How We Are Harmed, How We Can Heal*. In this book I discuss illness as an experience of violation that affects not just those who are ill, but also those who witness their struggles with the illness. While the experience of the witness can be painful, there is also the potential for healing if we witness with compassion and we feel effective in what we have to offer. Hopefully, this project will provide a meaningful action that feels like a worthy outcome to you, too. It is also possible that thinking through these questions will put you in touch with what really matters to you. I trust you will welcome this insight.

4. Contributing to the Witnessing Project Archive

The Treatment Dedication Project is a component of the Witnessing Project. We are establishing an archive to which people who dedicate their treatments can contribute a brief account of what they did. In this way, their experience can inspire others. You may want to help the patient write a brief account or the patient may want to dictate an account to you, which you submit for him or her. We are also eager to post what the experience was like for you, the patient’s compassionate witness and helper. You can reach the witnessing project at www.witnessingproject.org. There will be a link to the Treatment Dedication Project.