

# Tips for Survival

*By Dr. Drew Pinsky*

Earning the undisputed title of the world's greatest cyclist, Lance Armstrong crossed the finish line leading the Tour de France for the seventh time. Yet the true scope of his triumph does not begin and end on a bicycle. For the 10 million Americans living with cancer, Lance Armstrong holds another admirable title — **Cancer Survivor**.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege to sit down with Lance and discuss what it means to survive and "live strong." The interview was taped for a new special on Discovery Health called *Lance Armstrong: Stories of Survival*. I was impressed by the fortitude and intensity of Lance's courage and determination, just some of the many characteristics that have made him an inspiration for millions of cancer patients around the world.

The conversation with Lance led me to think about what "**survival**" means. During the past two decades practicing general medicine, I have had the privilege of caring for a wide variety of patients, most of whom have endured serious and life-threatening conditions. Throughout the course of my career, I have identified several qualities that help patients in the struggle to regain their health. In honor of Lance Armstrong and survivors everywhere — whether they be cancer survivors, survivors of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, or other courageous people who have faced adversity — I offer the following tips for living strong every day.

## 1. Hope

**Never lose hope.** If you have a life-threatening condition, ask your doctor for an honest and realistic appraisal of your prognosis. A positive outlook can have a powerful effect on survival. When I interviewed Lance Armstrong, I was very impressed with his outlook on life. Lance firmly believes that you never know what advancement is right around the corner. Try always to keep a positive outlook.

## 2. Information

We live in the information age. Every patient should be knowledgeable about his or her condition. Collecting information allows you to participate in the decision-making process concerning your disease. However, it's important not to go about this process alone. Doing so is similar to a doctor serving as his or her own physician, and we all know that can be a foolish practice! Seek the input and counsel of health care practitioners who spend their lives managing life-threatening conditions. Know who's an expert, and never hesitate to ask for additional consultation.

## 3. Control

Prepare for every contingency. Should you need equipment to keep your home safe or require in-home supportive services, make these wishes clear to your doctors. Have an

advanced directive and share your plan and ideas with someone you trust. Next, instruct that person on the philosophy of care you wish to follow should you be incapable of caring for yourself. This process provides peace of mind and the flexibility to deal with problems as they emerge.

#### **4. Joy**

I believe joy is the single most important emotion for maintaining physical and emotional health. Joy is a process of emotional renewal, and research shows that it enhances the functioning of important physiological health systems, such as the immune system. To be experienced fully, joy must be enhanced mutually – it is something to be shared with another. This is hard for some people to do, but it's important to appreciate the joy in others and surround yourself with those who can appreciate your joy. Being of service to others can amplify this experience.

#### **5. Faith**

How you express faith is highly personal. The common thread among my patients recovering from cancer or addiction is the ability to connect with a higher power. My patients derive tremendous benefit from finding meaning in the transcendent. For some, it's a highly developed and personal relationship with a deity. For others, it's a meaningful connection to life and service to humanity.

#### **6. Important Relationships**

None of the aforementioned suggestions has any meaning without the support of loved ones. Stay close to them, and spend time connecting. The most common struggle I have witnessed among my patients is the desire to make meaning of life, especially when confronted with the potential of theirs being cut short. Critically ill patients usually realize that our most important relationships give life meaning. Don't squander opportunities to spend time with people you love. Being with loved ones naturally enhances the positive emotions that may have an impact on your recovery.

#### **7. Structure**

Don't get overwhelmed by all the doctor appointments, tests and treatments. Approach these burdens in a structured way, and plan them out. Ask your doctors for as much information possible about what to expect going forward. Many illnesses require a nurse or case manager for supervised care. Identify that person, and get to know him or her on a first-name basis. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

#### **8. Exercise/Diet**

General health maintenance considerations should not be overlooked when dealing with a serious illness. Sometimes the recovery process drags on, and patients forget to tend to

their routine health needs, including diet and exercise, supplements, mammograms, flu shots, pap smears, colonoscopies and cardiovascular screening tests.