**When Cancer Disappears: The Curious Phenomenon of “Unexpected Remission”**

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We’ve all heard a story like this one. After trying all that Western medicine has to offer, a person with Stage 4 cancer is told there is nothing more the doctors can do and is sent home to receive hospice care. Five years later, that person strolls into the doctor’s office feeling great, with no further evidence of cancer.

In the medical world, this kind of case is referred to as a *spontaneous remission*, which is defined as *“the disappearance, complete or incomplete, of cancer without medical treatment or with medical treatment that is considered inadequate to produce the resulting disappearance of disease symptoms or tumor.”1* Many researchers, including myself, believe that the word *spontaneous* is a misnomer and should be changed to *unexpected* or *unlikely*. We feel this way because few things in life are truly spontaneous—occurring purely by accident. It is more likely that these remissions have a cause—or two or three—that science has not yet identified.

**Background**

Regardless of what we call them, unexpected remissions do occur, and more than one thousand cases (across all types of cancer) have been published in medical journals. Thousands more have most likely occurred but not been published, because most doctors don’t take the time to write up a report and submit it to a journal—which unfortunately is currently the only way of tracking these kinds of cases. Based on what has been published, unexpected remissions are estimated to occur in one out of every sixty thousand to one hundred thousand cancer patients; however, the true incidence rate is likely higher than that due to underreporting.2

Over the past century, there has been a steady flow of published case reports along with flashes of increased interest in this topic. For example, in the 1960s, the first two scientific books on unexpected remission were published, which led to a sharp increase in the number of case reports submitted to medical journals.3 After awhile, however, interest in the topic lulled again until the late 1980s when the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) launched the [Spontaneous Remission Project](http://noetic.org/research/project/online-spontaneous-remission-bibliography-project/), which culminated in the publication of a comprehensive bibliography of documented cases.4 Since then, approximately twenty new cases of unexpected remission are published each year, and there still has been a noticeable lack of formal research into why these remissions might occur.

It’s understandable, in a way. How do you begin to research something you cannot explain? Many conventional doctors feel threatened by these “miraculous” cures and don’t wish to talk about them—much less research them—for fear that they will give “false hope” to their other patients. In fact, most of the unexpected remission survivors I have studied are thrilled to have finally found a professional who is interested in learning how they healed. They often lament, “My doctor didn’t even ask how I did it.”

**The Present Research**

Perhaps because I am a qualitative researcher and not a medical doctor, I have always been fascinated by cases of unexpected remission. When I began studying them during my doctoral studies at the University of California at Berkeley, I was disappointed to see how little research had been done on this topic. The first problem I saw was that there was no database where I could easily find and analyze these cases. The second issue I noticed was that two groups of people had been largely ignored in the research: the survivors themselves as well as nonallopathic healers. It seemed odd that in an effort to explain unexpected remissions, we weren’t asking the opinions of the people who had actually healed. I also couldn’t understand why, when trying to explain a remission that is by definition *not* a result of allopathic treatment, we weren’t seeking out hypotheses from nonallopathic healers.

As a result, my dissertation research involved collecting hypotheses from these two previously ignored groups about why unexpected remissions may occur. More specifically, I spent ten months traveling the world in search of fifty nonallopathic cancer healers. My research led me to interview healers in the United States, China, Japan, New Zealand, Thailand, India, England, Ireland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Brazil (translators were used when necessary). When I returned from this amazing trip, I found twenty unpublished cases of unexpected remission and conducted phone interviews with the survivors. I purposely sought out unpublished cases first, in order to see if the underreporting issues were true—which they were. I am grateful to the American Cancer Society for providing partial funding for this study.

My seventy hour-long interviews resulted in more than three thousand pages of transcripts, which I analyzed multiple times to find recurring themes. I identified more than seventy-five “treatments” for cancer, six of which were “very frequent” among all seventy subjects. Underlying beliefs about cancer also emerged from the interviews, of which three were very frequent. I am happy to share these results here in an abbreviated form. Please remember that these are hypotheses only, not facts.

***Belief #1: Change the Conditions under which Cancer Thrives***

The majority of my interviewees believed that cancer thrives under certain, suboptimal conditions in the body-mind-spirit system and that to remove cancer, those underlying conditions must change. Healer #21 from Hawaii explained it this way:

*The most successful recoveries seem to be strongly associated with major mental, emotional, or physical behavioral changes among the people with the illness. What is major for one person, of course, may not be the same for another . . . I know of one success where a woman left her family, took up a different religion, changed her clothing and diet, and moved to a different country. Maybe she needed all of those changes or maybe not, but overall it worked for her. I know of another person, a man, who simply stopped trying to outdo his father, and that worked for him.*

***Belief #2: Illness = Blockage/Slowness; Health = Movement***

The majority of my interviewees also believed that any illness—including cancer—represents a blockage or slowness somewhere in the body-mind-spirit system, whereas health occurs when there is a state of unhindered movement or flow.

*FIELD NOTES: Healer #1 explained his theory of “bypasses,” which he described as psychological defense mechanisms that function to create a bypass around an energetic block. He said that this energetic block can be located at either the spiritual, mental, emotional, or physical level and that these bypasses become solidified over time. In his opinion, true healing only occurs when a person (1) stops bypassing and (2) releases the original blockage.*

***Belief #3: A Body-Mind-Spirit Interaction Exists, and Energy Permeates All Three Levels***

The third belief that the majority of my interviewees discussed was the idea that a body-mind-spirit interaction exists and that energy permeates all three of these levels. According to Healer #35, an American-born, Peruvian-trained shaman:

*You have to have mind, body, and spirit healing. . . Most of us who live in our physical bodies, we don't even know about spiritual or emotional bodies. So we have to connect with all three of them. But you see, in the mountains of the Andes, [the Andean people] are already connected.*

In addition to these three underlying beliefs about health, there were also six treatments that the cancer survivors and healers discussed most frequently. These included physical as well as emotional, energetic, and spiritual “treatments.” They are listed below in alphabetical order.

***Changing One’s Diet***

The majority of my interviewees believed it was important to change their diet to primarily whole vegetables, fruits, grains, and beans, while eliminating meat, sugar, dairy, and refined grains. Unexpected Survivor #16, who overcame liver cancer without conventional medical treatment, explains the major changes he made in his diet:

*[I healed] by just going on a basic, good, predominantly raw, vegan diet alone and supplementing it with lots of juices, like carrot juice, which of course is packed with nutrients. And the reason why the juices are so important is we have depleted basically all of our produce . . . That’s the reason for using juices as a supplement . . . All of a sudden the body says, Wow! It’s like watering the lawn when it’s dry.*

***Experiencing a Deepening of Spirituality***

The majority of my interviewees also discussed feeling—not just believing but actually *feeling*—an internal sensation of divine, loving energy. Some even had transcendent experiences, such as Unexpected Survivor #4, who healed from a Stage 3 lung cancer without conventional medical treatment:

*It was a ten-day, silent retreat, where you couldn’t speak, you couldn’t acknowledge other people in the room, and you just meditated for like fourteen hours a day. And I had this experience that I can’t explain. It was like all of a sudden there was a flash, and in my eyes I could see rivers of energy swirling around and at the same time felt that same thing through every cell of my body. And there’s a word for it, but I forget what the teacher said it was—but he explained that, “You felt your soul. You felt your true essence.” And I said, “Did I feel God?” And he kind of smiled and said, “Some people may call it that.”*

***Feeling Love/Joy/Happiness***

The majority of my interviewees also discussed the importance of increasing love and happiness in their life in order to help regain their health.

*FIELD NOTES: [Unexpected Survivor #5, who overcame a rare lymphoma without conventional medical treatment] said that the energy/spiritual healer that he saw flooded his lymph system with energy and that after the treatment he felt like “a teenager in love.” He felt love toward everyone and everything. He said the treatment made him realize that if he could only find a way to feel that level of unconditional love all of the time, then he would be healed from his cancer.*

***Releasing Repressed Emotions***

Because many of my interviewees believed that illness represents a state of blockage, they therefore believed that it was healthy to release any emotions they had been holding onto, such as fear, anger, and grief. Unexpected Survivor #19, who overcame pancreatic cancer without conventional medical treatment, explains her insight into this process:

*I believe that the energy stuck in my body that appeared to be a mass or a tumor, and which [my physicians] called cancer, had been caused by these patterns that I was describing to you that don’t get released, that are continually overlaid, over and over and over, wherever they are. So if it’s kidney cancer, it’s probably excessive fears; if it’s lung cancer, it’s grief of some sort that hasn’t been resolved. I mean, I think they can be very much tracked back to patterns, thought patterns, thought forms that are not releasing, and therefore they hold in the cell memory are not being released.*

***Taking Herbs or Vitamins***

Many of my interviewees also took various forms of supplements, with the belief that they would help to detoxify their body or boost their immune system or both. Here is how Unexpected Survivor #8, who overcame Stage 3 colon cancer, described it:

*Dr. Turner: Of all the things you just told me about, what do you think was the most influential for your healing, or are they all pretty equal for you?*

*Unexpected Survivor #8: I would say, for my body, that would be the Wholly Immune [supplement] that I got . . . It has like about fifty different things in it . . . [A friend] researched it and said, “In that Wholly Immune, you’ve got seven cancer fighters. If you were taking them on their own, it wouldn’t be as potent.” He said that because they’re in combination, it acts as a cancer destroyer.*

***Using Intuition to Help Make Treatment Decisions***

Finally, many of my interviewees talked about the importance of using intuition to help make treatment-related decisions. For example, Unexpected Survivor #7, who overcame recurrent metastatic breast cancer after conventional medicine had failed to work, described how a healer’s intuition matched her own:

*[The Tibetan healer] took his finger and with a pinpoint accuracy touched every spot on my body where I had had cancer, or where I had cancer presently. It was amazing! He could see what scans couldn’t see. I had predicted my cancer four times. I had led [my doctors] to it with a pinpoint of accuracy before the scans could even pick up the collection of cells. [The Tibetan healer] could do what I could do with my own body.*

In addition to the six “treatments” listed above, which were common among both the healers and the unexpected survivors, there were additional treatments that were more frequent in one group than the other. For example, the following three themes were very frequent among the twenty unexpected survivors, but less so among the healers.

***Taking Control of Health Decisions***

The vast majority of the unexpected survivors discussed taking a more active role in health decision-making, as opposed to passively accepting whatever their doctors told them. Unexpected Survivor #9, who overcame recurrent metastatic breast cancer after conventional medicine had failed to work, describes it this way:

*Once the panic and fear had subsided after the breast cancer returned for the fifth time, I felt as certain as I ever had been that the only person who could save me was the scientist within . . . For five years, I had done everything my doctors had advised and undergone all the treatments that they had prescribed . . . [This time] I decided that instead I would look at breast cancer in a detached way, as a natural scientist, and try to understand the disease as a type of natural phenomenon.*

***Having a Strong Will to Live***

The vast majority of the unexpected survivors demonstrated a strong will to live. Unexpected Survivor #15, who overcame Stage 3 breast cancer without conventional medicine, demonstrates this willfulness:

*The doctor said to me, “After you get this surgery done and have the chemo and radiation, we can give you five more years to live.” And I thought, I want to live more than five years! So, when the doctor said that, I got mad . . . So I kind of went out with an attitude of this isn’t going to beat me. I’m going to do this.*

***Receiving Social Support***

Finally, the vast majority of unexpected survivors in this study described receiving positive social support during their cancer experience. Unexpected Survivor #13 describes the outpouring of love that she received:

*One of the things I truly learned [when I had cancer] is that I am valued . . . I was able to share the reality of my experience, and people resonated with that and just stepped in to do whatever was needed. It was a huge validation of the universe and that all life is valued. I wasn’t valued because I’m me, my person necessarily, but because my* life*has value. All life has value, and that includes mine . . . It’s a wonderful consequence of this disease, the outpouring of love. Well, maybe it’s the purpose*

There were two themes that occurred more frequently among the healers than the unexpected survivors: (1) healing, infusing, or unblocking energy and (2) strengthening or activating the immune system. You can read more about these, as well as further analysis of all themes, in my [full dissertation](http://www.shuniyahealing.com/offer/research.html).

**Future Directions**

The results from this qualitative study provide some hypotheses as to why unexpected remission may occur. What is needed now is for researchers to study these hypotheses in clinical trials that can test first for safety, then for feasibility, and finally for causality. In addition, there is an immediate need for a central database of unexpected remission case reports, ideally one that is online.

I am currently working on creating such a database and website, with the hope that survivors, doctors, and healers will be able to quickly submit their case reports so that researchers like myself can verify and analyze them. Eventually, this de-identified (anonymous) database will also be searchable by the public, serving not only as a portal for researchers but also as a source of inspiration for cancer patients who are currently battling the disease.

If you know anyone who has healed their cancer either (1) without conventional medicine, (2) after conventional medicine failed, or (3) who used integrative methods to outlive a dire prognosis, please encourage them to submit their case at [www.UnexpectedRemission.org](http://www.unexpectedremission.org/) (currently in beta). All submitted reports will be automatically de-identified unless specifically asked not to by the survivor.

In closing, I would like to say that studying anomalies such as unexpected remissions is neither easy, nor uncontroversial, nor immediately fruitful. However, I firmly believe that such research can lead us to a new paradigm of scientific understanding, and that by rigorously investigating unexpected remissions—as opposed to simply ignoring them—we can make significant advances in the war on cancer.

**Notes**

1. B. O’Regan, *Spontaneous Remission: An Annotated Bibliography* (Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1995).

2. W. H. Cole, “Efforts to Explain Spontaneous Regression of Cancer,” *Journal of Surgical Oncology* 17, no. 3 (1981): 201–209.

3. W. Boyd, *The Spontaneous Regression of Cancer* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1966); T. C. Everson and W. H. Cole, *Spontaneous Regression of Cancer* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1966).

4. B. O’Regan, *Spontaneous Remission: An Annotated Bibliography*.