

Reflection: making time for meeting ourselves



“I focus on how far I have come, rather than how far I have to go.”

Reflection

The experience of illness or trauma often leads us to dwell on the past and how things used to be. This can naturally lead to a sense of loss and feelings of sadness, denial or anger. However, illness also offers a rare opportunity to take a fresh look at what is important and gives meaning in our lives. We can take time for reflection.

Making time for reflection can help us to remember our enduring strengths and qualities, and make sense of illness as part of life’s journey. From a place of calm and peacefulness, we can stand back and look at ourselves and what has happened, from the outside. We can begin to understand our own reactions and release any feelings of anger, anxiety and attachment. We can then focus on how far we have come, not how far we have to go. This helps us to build on our positive experiences and strengthen our self-esteem.

Reflection as a tool is about processing our thoughts and experiences from a place of stillness and without judgment. As we practise, we can recognise mistakes we have made without feeling we have failed. If we have feelings of guilt, we can forgive others and forgive ourselves. We begin to take a more detached view about what is happening, and learn from our experiences. We can also focus on the positive contributions we made and what went right in a situation.

Reflection can also help us to come to a place of acceptance concerning our illness and to prepare for the future, whatever it holds, on a practical, emotional or spiritual level.

Benefits during illness

Using reflection:

- enables us to observe and let go of negative emotions
- helps us to learn from our mistakes
- increases acceptance and contentment in our life
- reduces stress
- boosts self-esteem
- helps us to consider the future, whatever it holds.

Reflections

Although I earn my living by writing, I found I was totally unable to write a word for the first year of my illness and treatment. Instead, I drew flowers on a page and coloured them in, one petal, each day at a time, in a colour that caught my mood. Soon I had bunches of brilliant flowers which summarised my journey through courses of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Through reflection I realised that illness is not a hiatus in life – it is part of living and needs to be lived to the full. It brings many blessings and opportunities for self-learning.

Confined to bed for long periods because of my illness, I began to think of the holidays we took as a family over all those years. I would choose one holiday and try and remember it in as much detail as I could – the weather, the places we visited, the food, and so on. But what came back most was people's friendliness and the fun we had. It made me feel good.

Looking back, I became aware that I had always been hard on my body and mind, pushing them despite their limitations, often in the face of tiredness or sickness. I had indeed battled with my own physical self. I have learned that acceptance of illness is not a state of "giving up", but rather a state of grace which is gentle on the body, mind and spirit and encourages healing at all levels. I have forgiven myself for the past and now spend time nurturing myself without feeling guilty.

Now that my time is limited, reflecting on my own gives me an opportunity to think about dying. I am able to put things in order and give some of my special possessions to friends and family. Talking about my plans and wishes is comforting for me and for the special people in my life.

Practising

- * While relaxing, think about good things that have happened to you in your life, for example, a holiday or a personal achievement, and how they felt for you at the time. You may like to look at photograph albums or mementos to help you recall significant events.

- * Think about recent events and feelings, perhaps at the end of a day or week. Rather than focusing on failures, make a mental note of what went well for you, what you achieved (however small) and what you have learned about your qualities and strengths. You might ask yourself these questions:
 - What made me feel content today (or this week)?
 - Where was I successful today (or this week)?
 - What have I learned about myself?
- * Take a few minutes on a regular basis to sit peacefully and reflect on your life and its meaning, for example, on the importance of family, your work, the opportunities you have.
- * Some people like to keep a journal and write down these kinds of reflections. As an alternative to keeping a journal, you may feel inspired to draw or paint your reflections, or to write a poem. For inspiration, listen to the following CD track:



Track 16: Flawless diamond (6½ mins)

- * Besides reflecting on your own, it is important to have a support network. Ask yourself the question, 'Who do I turn to for support in different situations?' Find a friend, partner or colleague you can share difficult issues and feelings with. Sometimes you need someone outside of the situation, possibly a professional counsellor or therapist. Remember to practise your listening skills, too (see **Tool 5: Listening**).
- * Practise asking for help. Sometimes this may seem quite alien, particularly if you have always been the one who supports and helps others. However, asking for help makes another person feel useful while providing you with much needed support.
- * Choose some music you enjoy listening to, or a poem that has meaning for you at this time, to help you to reflect. There are some examples on the two CD tracks below.
- * Listen to the following CD tracks to prompt your own reflections:



Track 17: Waving (2½ mins)

Track 18: Little Butterfly (5½ mins)

Positive thoughts



Each day brings opportunities for me to learn more about myself.

Remaining open to life helps me to reach my full potential.

I appreciate my successes, and learn from my mistakes.

I can move forward when I forgive myself and let go of my mistakes.

Understanding that life is all about learning, I can accept and come to enjoy whatever I do.