

Hi! I am Emily, a Licensed Professional Counselor on the Cancer Rehab and Integrative Medicine team. I became a Counselor and Walk and Talk Coach because of cancer.

My cancer journey began 20 years ago when I lost my father to leukemia. He passed away a few months before I earned my doctorate in Optometry. After 8 years of college, overnight my most important lesson became how to live my life and love the people in it because “life is short and I am not”. Dad and I had tall height and humor in common, but sadly little else at that time, since he died amongst much denial, anger and estrangement in his family.

Many oncologists like to tell me that my Dad’s cancer can now be “healed” with a pill. While this news is a credit to advancements in medicine, it is not all that helpful to someone who developed a similar (yet unrelated?), incurable blood cancer a few months before I turned 40. I celebrated my 10th cancer anniversary this last month, outliving my original prognosis by 100%.

I wonder *How? Why me? Why not me?* I can simultaneously worry, and also celebrate. I live well with cancer, no longer a crisis or even something I think about every day (a victory!). I credit a lot of it to what I have learned from research about the **how and why our cancer stories persist in our brains and bodies.**

Like many cancers, mine does NOT have a magic pill. Even if it did, the fallout from my losing someone to cancer and having cancer is more life-altering than just my physical survival. The psychological stress of the disease impacts my ongoing wellness. I thought I had learned from my father’s death by living a life of meaning and purpose, helping others, and loving my husband and two young kids. When diagnosed myself, I realized ***I was not immune.***

My first cancer counselor told me about a concept known as **Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI)**. PNI is the study of how our mind (both thoughts and feelings) impact our immunity to things such as infections from cancer and its treatments. This includes your brain’s adaptation to stress from the cancer diagnosis and monitoring its ongoing progression. It is a two-way street: our stress is related to cancer and cancer can be related to stress.

PNI is not a new concept, nor has it been met without controversy. It is related to the term, **psychosomatic**, which really means, our stress makes our bodies unwell and painful things worse. Some individuals are highly emotional while many cancer survivors manifest their stress as increased physical symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety.

In 1985, Candace Pert found that [“communication chemicals of the nervous system could also speak directly to the immune system”](#). Cohen and Rabin (1998) published an editorial in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute highlighting that [“psychological stress can alter immune function...which plays a role in regulating tumor growth...\[therefore\], stress-reduction interventions will influence the progression of the disease”](#).

[Bowen and Lamkin \(2013\)](#) found that early life stress can increase one's risk of **cancer-related fatigue**. The study listed depression, quality of life and immune dysregulation as co-morbid concerns. The authors describe medical mechanisms present in individuals who had ongoing neurological stress from childhood and adult life events AND promising psychological interventions such as therapies, including counseling, yoga and exercise.

These body+brain tools are a main reason I value and recommend my [“Walk and Talk” sessions](#), which can be so empowering for fellow survivors!

We now know there are brain cells in our gut and I would not be surprised if there are gut cells in our brains (emotional eating!?). The well-named Vagus (latin for “wandering”) nerve runs from your brainstem all the way to your stomach, traveling through your voice box, heart and lungs. Your vagus nerve communicates information from your environment to your brain and vice versa. It is responsible for much of our fight-flight nervous system reactions that happen when we are growing up and are critical to effective counseling and coaching for cancer recovery.

PNI research about the Vagus nerve techniques is validation of how traumatic moments of cancer diagnosis, treatment and ongoing check-ups can all impact your thinking, breathing, ability to speak up to doctors, heart rate, gut and overall mood.

“What happens in Vagus, happens everywhere!” I did not say Dad and I had good humor...

I treat Vagus nerve stress in cancer survivors (<https://austinmentalwellness.com/services/>). You can take and tame your own fear, anger, confusion and overwhelm as motivation to know more about yourself and how your mind, body and spirit work together to **heal old pain, present symptoms and future anxieties**. Sharing this research and paying it forward is not a magic pill or wand, yet I hope a helpful GPS signal on your cancer journey and success.

Here are some [reflection questions](#) to ask yourself, your cancer counselor or me at my upcoming talk at Cancer Rehab and Integrative Medicine on Saturday, March 30th (the 23rd anniversary of my father's passing) from 2p to 330pm. Please email me any other questions or ideas you would like to learn more about at emily@austinmentalwellness.com.

- What are some of your recurring mental and emotional patterns, both healthy and unhealthy? How has cancer changed you?
- While many treatments deal with the physical aspects of cancer, how do you deal with your thoughts and feelings?
- What are your 'feel-good' strategies that make you feel better? How well do you balance the stress in your life with calm and tranquility?