

DIAGNOSIS SURVIVAL *Guide*



12 TIPS TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE
IN TOUGH TIMES



TAMARA K. ANDERSON

Endorsements for **Diagnosis Survival Guide**

“This *Diagnosis Survival Guide* is such a needed thing. We have to talk about these things and let others know they are not alone and will be ok.”
– CHRISTINE, *R.N. and Cancer Survivor*

“I think this *Diagnosis Survival Guide* should be something therapists should give to their patients to get them from fear to hope.”
– LYNN WILKINSON, *Occupational Therapist*

“When the diagnosis comes, when the news isn’t good, when my life script includes something I never wanted, I long for a trusted companion to breathe hope into my sudden fearfulness. In the *Diagnosis Survival Guide*, Tamara Anderson offers a how-to guide born of experience. Life may not be the normal we anticipated but Tamara assures we can live rich and full.”

– PEGGY SUE WELLS, author of *What to do When You Don’t Know What to Say*

“I really like that the *Diagnosis Survival Guide* is a powerful quick read. It offers great advice. Tamara gives the reader a piece of her heart and her struggle, which makes it human. It is well written, easy to read, and therefore should be well received.”

– JEANNE BOEHMLER, *Special Education Teacher*

Copyright Tamara K. Anderson 2017

You may print a copy of this document for your own personal use.

If you want to use any of this material for any other use,

please contact me for permission through my website,

tamarakanderson.com.



Daily Hope Publishing

TABLE OF CONTENTS



DIAGNOSIS SURVIVAL GUIDE	1
1. Cling to Normal Routines.	3
2. Forget the Future—Focus on Today.	4
3. Be Gentle with Grief.	5
4. Diagnosis Doesn't Define the Person	9
5. Journaling and Gratitude.	10
6. Pick Good Health Care Providers.	12
7. Overcoming Fear Through Learning.	14
8. Build a Support Network	15
9. Stay Involved Through Service	17
10. Plan for Stress Relief.	19
11. The Biggest Trap—Comparison.	21
12. Resistance Training and Joy.	22
Conclusion	24
 About the Author	 26

DIAGNOSIS SURVIVAL GUIDE

12 Tips to Survive and Thrive in Tough Times



by Tamara K. Anderson

Receiving a diagnosis is agonizing. I know. I've been there—in a hospital waiting room, the minutes ticking by like a slow bass drum. You try to ignore the knots in your stomach while your head spins with endless thoughts and questions:

When will they be back? I wonder what the results of the testing will be? How long until I know the diagnosis? Will life ever be the same? I hope they are mistaken, and everything will be fine.

Diagnosis

Ordinarily, people feel one of two emotions (or perhaps a combination of the two) as they face a diagnosis: 1. Relief or 2. Devastation.

1. Relief: You feel relief at finally having a name for what has changed your life. You feel validated knowing something was wrong. You feel a sense of purpose to learn what you can do to fight and even overcome this challenge.

For example, I felt tremendous relief when my oldest son finally received a diagnosis that his eyes were not tracking together. I had been to a multitude of doctors—even optometrists that couldn't find anything wrong with him. And yet he still struggled with reading (in 4th grade).

When I finally went to a developmental optician and they gave him a diagnosis, I almost cried with relief. Now that we had a proper diagnosis, the rigorous treatment and therapy could begin.

2. Devastation: You receive a diagnosis with utter devastation. Diagnosis hits some with the force of a tsunami wave. This tsunami changes, shifts, and alters your world: autism, cancer, paralysis, diabetes, or depression—any diagnosis has the strength to force a life detour or change of course.

When my second son was diagnosed with autism, I fell into the devastation camp. Whatever fleeting relief I felt was completely overpowered by the shock of the official diagnosis. I knew there was no cure for autism.

I barely contained my emotions through the end of the meeting, then I ran from the room and cried for the entire three-and-a-half-hour drive home. The diagnosis crushed my life's plan! I watched my dreams swirl down a dark drain, devouring every ounce of joy and happiness for the future.

What was I left with?

Fear.

- Fear of the monster diagnosis that had just swallowed my dreams.
- Fear of the future.
- Fear I knew NOTHING about this diagnosis.
- Fear I couldn't and didn't aspire to climb this dark, foreboding mountain placed in my path.

Since that day, my life has been one of extremes: crippling sorrow and magical joy. At times, those extreme emotions happen in one day or last for a season.

I have learned to ride this diagnosis roller coaster . . . throwing my hands up and laughing for the thrill of it at times, while closing my eyes with fear and dread when approaching new and frightening scenarios.

I am writing this guide because I would have loved having some help along my new path. Now that I've figured out some things that are useful and work, I'd like to share what I have learned with others, so that it is easier for you than it was for me.

You can pretend I am right there with you giving you a hug and handing you the "cheats" or "hacks" for surviving diagnosis fear and navigating forward.

Consider my checklist as a "how to guide" to navigating a "new normal" with cautious apprehension—no matter the diagnosis.

I wrote this so others would realize in the darkest moment of life that they are not alone!! Someone else has looked at that dark mountain of diagnosis, feeling that dizzying range of emotions, and can help guide you safely to the top.

So, let's climb this mountain—together.

CLING TO NORMAL ROUTINES



If you're going through hell, keep going.

— Attributed to Winston Churchill

WHEN HITTING A LIFE DETOUR, it's best to hold tight to the mundane details of daily life. In times of chaos and loss, your soul craves normality.

Facing the first day post-diagnosis, I would have rather stayed in bed and pulled the covers over my head. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—I had young children who needed me, so I had to get up. I did the normal everyday things to survive: Showering, preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner, playing with the kids, driving children to school, cleaning the house, reading a book, and singing children's songs (if you have kids in the house, you'll understand).

These were routines I had done thousands of times before, but simply trudging through the daily routine breathed life back into my shattered heart. I had survived one day!! That evolved into one week, and then one month post-diagnosis. Hope began to blossom in my soul—maybe I could do this after all.

Not very long ago I was visiting a friend who was going through chemotherapy. She explained to me that she was still working a couple of days a week so she could feel “normal.” This is a perfect example of what I am talking about. Her life had been side-tracked when the diagnosis of cancer was pronounced—so she clung to the things in her life that felt familiar and reassuring.

There is a psychological benefit to doing normal things in completely abnormal times. It is like eating comfort food for the brain—and we all love our comfort food or our normal routines—especially amid chaos.

Once a diagnosis hits, immerse yourself in your daily routines. Not only is there comfort in these daily routines, but you may be surprised at how these mundane things—that may have felt boring or even stressful—when viewed from the other side of a diagnosis, may become moments of gratitude or blessings. Following routines might just help with survival during the first day, the first week, and even the first year.

FORGET THE FUTURE—FOCUS ON TODAY



Fear of the future is worse than one's present.

— Quintilian

DOES THINKING of the future cause extreme worry?

Is finding hope an unimaginable or incomprehensible goal? How do people fathom the future when daily survival is completely overwhelming?

They don't.

When dreams lay shattered, it is crucial to lay aside the future for a moment, while processing the present.

Push earlier goals and expectations out of your mind and **simply survive today**.

Survival in the here and now is more important than figuring out what the next year will encompass. With the diagnosis fresh in my mind, I couldn't imagine living with the same stress for a year or two or ten. The thought made me want to cry, weep, and give up.

Instead, I coached myself to stay focused on the present. I learned *life unfolds one day at a time*. It is best to deal with it on a minute-by-minute, day-by-day basis. God gives us the grace to survive moment to moment.

One of my friends, Lynn Wilkinson, who was an occupational therapist for forty years, has a saying: "Don't worry about tomorrow; God is already there."

That is what I did. I left the future to God—trusting He would open the right doors at the right time. I had to believe that He would continue to lift and strengthen and help me through His grace in the future. It was imperative to have faith and hope while I kept fighting and praying.

And gradually, I began to set little goals as I could process them. The professionals I worked with had a mountain of goals, but my goals came more slowly. Maybe this was because I was so close to the situation, and I had to live it every day. It simply took me longer to become steadier on my feet.

Daily survival turned into years, and now over a decade of growing pains mingled with moments of pure joy.

In the wake of survival mode, I can now thrive one day at a time.

BE GENTLE WITH GRIEF



Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

– Psalms 30:5

ELIZABETH KÜBLER-ROSS created the “grief cycle” to describe the process experienced by the terminally ill. Anyone facing a major life detour or diagnosis can experience the grief cycle due to the loss of dreams, hopes, health, ambitions, or desires.

How I wish someone would have explained on diagnosis day that I would grieve for the “normal” life I would never have. Realizing I would experience the grief cycle would have helped me recognize the emotions I was feeling were normal.

It took several years to wade through this difficult and very personal Grief Cycle:

- 1) **Denial** there was anything wrong;
- 2) **Anger** at the diagnosing physician and God;
- 3) The **bargaining** stage where I pleaded with God for healing;
- 4) Experiencing the weight of **depression** associated with loss; and
- 5) Finally coming to the **peace** of acceptance.

Denial: Yeah, I lived here for a while. It took me many months to come to terms with the fact that the diagnosis was indeed correct. But while I processed this, I did NOT want to tell anyone or talk about it. It was too painful!

My expectations and dreams for life had just been shattered, and I needed to grieve for them in my own private way. You will too. Acknowledge this, and then move forward when you feel ready.

Be aware that this isn't a stage you can rush, and the time spent at this point in the cycle is uniquely individual. It takes as much time as it takes.

Denial is a phase. Don't get stuck in it. This isn't healthy for you or your family. Denying there is a problem won't make it go away and only creates more challenges if it is not dealt with.

For those with friends or family members going through this cycle—the best advice I can give here is to be patient and supportive of your loved ones living in denial. And prayers probably wouldn't hurt.

Anger: I wish someone had explained the importance of being gentle with myself. As a believer, I couldn't understand why I was so angry with God. I wish I wouldn't have felt guilt on top of grief for the emotions raging within.

I dumped all of this raw emotion on God. Thank goodness He is big enough to take it, and good enough to let me vent.

I realize now that anger—at God, my husband, and others (for no “apparent” reason), was part of my grief cycle. I can now forgive myself for feeling anger because I realize it was a completely normal part of grief.

It is easy to try to blame everyone and everything for the diagnosis instead of realizing that playing the blame game doesn't change the past or the present.

Another word of caution: some people get stuck in this anger phase. It may feel easier to blame others for the problem, but that ultimately doesn't help you move forward.

Forgiving yourself and others is liberating. If you aren't there yet, pray for the strength to leave anger behind.

Often we aren't strong enough to do this on our own, but God is always big enough to strengthen us to do things we can't do on our own. My mantra can be found in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

Let it go! Leave anger behind. Be free. Move forward.

Bargaining: I begged and pleaded with God for healing. I promised to read the scriptures more faithfully, attend church with renewed vigor, be kinder, more patient, or even give my first-born child, or donate everything to charity—well, you catch the drift. But yes, I have promised grandiose things—often beyond my ability to maintain—and I'm sure everyone else has too, at times.

I had faith God could work miracles, but I felt angrier and more frustrated when the miracle I prayed for didn't happen. My prayers weren't answered the way I desired.

I had to learn the hard way that true faith is believing that even though God has the power to heal, perhaps he won't—and trusting that is for the best. I knew God could see the end from the beginning, and I had to hold fast and hope that He had my best interest at heart—maybe from an eternal perspective, because I sure couldn't see it right then.

It has been fifteen years since our initial diagnosis, and I can now see a few of the character-building reasons my family had to endure through several difficult diagnosis.

Dealing with children that have life-long diagnosis has helped me recognize what is truly important in life. I was often so busy caretaking that anything unimportant really did fall out of my life. I simply didn't have time to keep up on the most fashionable styles or worry about my child belonging to the most elite sports team when I could barely get my son to have a BM in the toilet at age eight.

I have become more loving, caring, more empathetic, more trusting in God. And now, I am writing about my experiences so that I can bring hope to others who are going through hard times.

I remember those years of anger and bargaining. I wondered, “why me?”

I have learned that the answer is “why not me?” We each have difficulties that tax us to our limits and beyond.

I needed to go through something really awful and hard for many years so that I could understand and empathize with others. I needed to learn that no matter how exhausted or angry I was that God would still be there. I needed to walk a steep and very rocky road so that I could someday reach the summit stronger and wiser and enjoy the mountain vista.

If I could go back to my younger “bargaining-self” I’d wrap her in my arms and cry with her. Then I would cheer her up and say, “This is awful and difficult, but you will discover how strong you can become through this.”

It is all about becoming.

Depression: This is the second reason it is important to be patient and gentle with yourself. It is a bitter pill to swallow a life-changing diagnosis.

This is what doctors refer to as situational depression. It occurs usually within 90-days of a diagnosis due to traumatic changes in life.

There will be days you don’t want to move. There will be moments you wish you could simply fast-forward because they are TOO HARD! I felt that way for a long time. For me it felt like diagnosis was a heavy backpack I had to now carry EVERY DAY. It was challenging to do some of the normal things I used to do with ease because of this psychological weight on my shoulders.

The difference between situational depression and clinical depression is usually a chemical imbalance that manifests itself in not being able to “bounce-back.” If depression interferes with your normal routine for more than six months, consider visiting a trained professional (a doctor or therapist) to talk about your symptoms.

Most cases of situational depression will disappear on their own as long as the person takes care of themselves. This will include exercising, eating and sleeping well, discussing their troubles with family or close friends or even joining a support group.

Eventually, as with any physical or psychological weight, you become stronger as you are able to process the diagnosis. But when I was weak, I leaned on God and on my family. They got me through.

The key here is to keep moving forward. Even if you take two steps forward and one step back on a daily basis, that slow progress amounts to consistent movement in the right direction. Keep taking those daily baby steps.

I love the tale of the *Tortoise and the Hare*. The hare begins the race running forward past the

turtle, but it was the turtle that won the race—because he kept moving and didn't get distracted along the way. Just keep moving by trudging through the daily chores of life and you will make it.

Peace: I vividly remember the day I felt a lasting peace again. It was glorious! It was as if the Winter of my life had finally started thawing into Spring.

God helped me finally reach this stage—and it was years after the first diagnosis, and following a second life-changing diagnosis in our family.

I felt moments of peace along the journey, but that final “I am okay with this diagnosis peace” took longer to reach. I am glad God was in it for the long haul with stubborn old me! I couldn't have made it without Him.

The keys for me were time and my relationship with God. I told God about the good, the bad and the ugly moments of every day. I prayed and vented every frustration to God.

There were many years of prayer and scripture study—because I felt empty inside. I felt broken. Thank goodness God loves broken things and can eventually help us heal as we turn to Him.

Attending church, praying, and studying the scriptures yoked me to God in a way that I could feel moments of peace even though my life was anything but peaceful.

An eventual peace that I was okay with how my life turned out—even though I never would have chosen this path settled on me. I felt joy again. I did feel stronger and more confident in myself and in the unique path I was walking with God. I truly was happy in the midst of my chaos.

Final thoughts about the grief cycle: Most people don't trudge through in a linear fashion—it's more like a roller coaster. These emotions ebb and flow—and even though you have “passed through” one stage doesn't mean you won't revisit it again. I ultimately came around to peace after I battled with God for a while. Time and God are efficient healers.

Learn from my story and be gentle with yourself when adjusting to a “new normal.” Grief is such a difficult beast to tame. Take credit for daily trudging through the raging emotions. Be patient. Peace will come eventually—I promise.

DIAGNOSIS DOESN'T DEFINE THE PERSON



See people for who they are — not the labels affixed to them.

AT FIRST, the diagnosis seemed to be all I could think about.

In the previous section, I described it as a heavy backpack. But this backpack was also like a sodden blanket, weighing heavily on my mind and suffocating all other thoughts. The problem was, I couldn't see very clearly through that blanket.

I eventually began to peek out from under the diagnosis blanket, and what I saw changed my perspective. My son had not changed at all due to the diagnosis. In fact, he was oblivious to the fact that he now had a "label." He was still my sweet boy. Whether he had a diagnosis or not, I was still going to love him. He was my son.

I learned something important that day: *A diagnosis doesn't define a person.* My son, Nathan, was still the same sweet soul he had always been. The diagnosis didn't change who he was.

Realizing this was part of my "ah-ha moment" as I processed and progressed past the situational depression caused by diagnosis.

The diagnosis was simply a way for professionals to name and properly treat an issue my son was experiencing. Post-diagnosis, the floodgates opened and the amount of help which followed surprised me. I didn't want the diagnosis, but we needed the help.

So, lift that heavy blanket and remember a diagnosis doesn't define a person—no matter if it is you or someone you love. Everything special, wonderful, unique—every quirk and characteristic, everything that defines you—is still there. A diagnosis doesn't erase any of that.

Take heart that a diagnosis doesn't make you less. If anything, it makes you become more: stronger, braver, empathetic, kinder, and wise.

JOURNALING AND GRATITUDE



Happiness depends more on the inward disposition of mind than on outward circumstances.

– Benjamin Franklin

IT IS EASY TO FALL into the trap of seeing the negative when life comes crashing down. But I quickly discovered a great life hack that helped me find joy: using a journal.

Journaling allowed me a space to be brutally honest, especially on the worst days. It also helped me seek for the little moments of joy and peace, while I sorted through the difficulties.

Here are some journal entries where I share some joys, and some heartaches:

September 26, 2006

We love our little dog. Jacob actually wanted to walk him on our family walk last night. That is quite a step for him because he used to be really afraid of the dog. It was also quite a sight to behold because Jacob was all over the place and I had to constantly untangle both Jacob and the dog because they would get caught in the leash.

I put Noelle in pig tails for the first time yesterday and she looked so cute. Of course she pulled them out about 5 minutes later, but at least we tried. Right now she is singing “teach me to walk in the light” as she tries to put her clothes back on (which she just took off). She is so cute, and stubborn. She is two! Oh, now she is naked. Better go.

September 27, 2006

This morning on the way to school Jordan was asking me why he doesn't have a normal brother that he can play with and talk to. We have had this discussion before, but it seemed particularly hard to answer this morning. I asked him why he thought Heavenly Father had sent Nathan to our family. He said that he didn't know. He said he wanted a twin brother or an older brother. I told him that Uncle Daniel was like his brother, and

that made him feel better. Then, he got sad and said, “Nathan and Jacob are never going to get married and I will always be a cousin, not an Uncle.” I told him that someday Noelle will get married and he will be an Uncle.

My heart is heavy right now. I feel bad that I don't have a better answer for Jordan. I wish that he did have brothers who could play with him. Jacob does play with Jordan, but it isn't quite the same. I guess I feel inadequate answering him as to why when I don't know or understand the “whys” myself.

I can now go back and remember both the good and the hard because I wrote these little snippets in my journal. I am thankful I wrote because it shares a little of my journey.

Some people have a journal where they ONLY write about little daily mercies they see or experience. Think what a powerful weapon this would be to read on days that are particularly devastating!

I have a friend who keeps notebooks everywhere—one in her car, her purse, her nightstand and she writes wherever she can. She is able to record ideas, journal about grief, or write about daily tiny blessings God has poured out since losing her husband. It has helped her process, vent, and remember the good and the bad.

Journaling has numerous benefits to offer beyond increasing your gratitude. There is a host of scientific and anecdotal support of this transformative tool. Among other things, journaling can:

- Provide clarity and insight into emotions and behavior
- Improve your success in changing habits
- Reduce stress
- Increase self-awareness
- Expand your perspective
- Act as a non-judgmental friend and counselor

Best of all, journaling is free, simple, and easy to do.

Grab a notebook and begin! Write about your joys, your sorrows, your shattered hopes, your dreams. Especially, write about the daily mercies or little miracles you see. Write a list of your blessings on particularly hard days: “I can breathe,” “I can see,” “I can love.”

When life is the hardest, seek for and find daily miracles through journaling. Start your gratitude or mercies journal today!

PICK GOOD HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS



An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

– Benjamin Franklin

THERE IS NOTHING AS AWFUL as a bad health care provider—they are in and out, too busy to care. They are too overly confident that they have all the answers, and they don't listen to your thoughts and ideas.

Conversely, there is nothing as relieving as a fantastic doctor, nurse, or therapist—the ones that feel it is their life calling to help and serve. I have visited and dealt with multiple health care professionals through the years.

The health care professionals I enjoyed working with were the ones who:

- Willingly listened
- Were specialists in my area of need
- Communicated well—especially with the patient
- Were personable and caring—especially of those with a disability
- Gave honest feedback
- Admitted they didn't know everything
- Researched and presented the best options with competency
- Were flexible enough to include my thoughts/feelings in the decision process
- Kept options open for treatment as different people react differently

Not sure where to begin your search? Ask around—nurses, other doctors, therapists, and especially in support groups. A question I found helpful: “If you were in my position, who would you pick as your doctor/therapist?”

The answers to these questions helped me find efficient, knowledgeable professionals who collaborated during the diagnosis, through treatment, and into the prognosis process.

Sometimes finding the right professional for diagnosis can be tricky. I remember visiting several doctors when I was worried about one of my children. The answers they gave just didn't fit with what I was seeing.

I finally prayed and asked God to help me know how to help my child. During the prayer, I

suddenly remembered visiting a doctor's office about five years before for one of my other children. I found that doctor's information, called and set up an appointment, and finally got the right diagnosis and therapy for my child.

Go with your gut on choosing good health care providers. If you feel you need a second opinion, get it. If you feel you would work better with someone else, change. Find the right health professionals that fit with you, your beliefs, and your personality.

I am thankful I kept looking and found the right people to help me not only through one diagnosis, but a few others of different family members a few years later.

OVERCOME FEAR THROUGH LEARNING



*Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.*

– Marie Curie

IT IS ALWAYS FRIGHTENING to face the unknown. Sometimes it would seem easier to stick our head in a hole like an ostrich and hope it will go away, but unfortunately, this doesn't work with a diagnosis. It can be painful to push through the fear and begin the quest to learn about the diagnosis.

Keep this in mind: Knowledge helps overcome fear.

Researching online made me feel like a little boat in a giant storm—tossed this way and that with so many thoughts and opinions. I didn't know which person to believe.

Knowledge empowers you when it comes from proven sources. Ask a doctor or other professional for reliable sources of information on the diagnosis.

The first person you need to listen to and learn from is the diagnosing physician and any technicians or therapists you are working with. This is their area of expertise.

If you are forgetful or feel overloaded with information when you are listening to a professional, ask if you can record their advice so that you can go back and listen and “digest” their counsel. It also helps to have a friend or family member go with you to any appointments so they can help you remember what the doctor says. You can also ask for copies of printed or electronic documents they can share with you about your diagnosis.

I love asking questions. One of my college professors once said, “Does anyone have a question besides Tamara?” Write your questions down before appointments so that you can maximize your time with your doctor and learn the answers to the questions you have about your particular diagnosis.

As you increase your understanding about the diagnosis, it leads to educated decisions and improved problem solving in coordination with professionals. You are a team working to move forward, and you'll find your fear diminishing.

BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK



*Grief knits two hearts in closer bonds than happiness ever can;
and common sufferings are far stronger links than common joys.*

– Alphonse de Lamartine

WHEN FACING ANY DIAGNOSIS, a valuable tool is an effective support network. It is too difficult to be strong all the time by yourself. Having a support network will give you trusted people to talk to and with whom you can share pain, sorrow, and grief.

Support Network Suggestions:

- Spouse
- Extended family
- Friends
- Teachers
- Therapists
- Online or local support groups
- Doctors
- Church organizations/pastors/God
- Respite providers (check online for ones in your area)

One of the hardest things about building a support network is learning to ask for help. Talking to friends naturally flowed into “How are you doing?” Instead of saying “fine,” I had to learn to say, “You know, I am really struggling right now.”

Often, I just needed a listening ear. For some reason, talking through my problems with a sympathetic soul helped me feel better and find ideas or answers I might not have considered before.

If you feel like you need to talk and no one is around, you can talk out loud to yourself or vent to God. Remember that you are processing information and life-changing events, so it is okay to vocally try to figure out solutions to your diagnosis dilemma.

Most people want to help, but they just don’t always know what to do. If you struggle asking

for help, remember that when you let others help and serve you and your family, you are blessing them by giving them an opportunity to serve. And as they serve you, you learn to love them more and they learn to love you more. Service = love.

Sometimes friends would ask, “Is there anything I can do to help?” I couldn’t always think of something in the moment, but reassured them that if I thought of something, I would let them know.

Then I had to swallow my pride and let them know if I thought of an area where I did need help. This conversation could look like this: “I need help brainstorming a solution to a problem. Would you mind helping me think of solutions?”

Tap the fantastic resources in your network. I remember asking questions to a teacher who was an expert with many years of experience in our diagnosis. I even shadowed her for a day so I could glean a bit of what she knew and watch her in action.

I am also part of a local support group and a private online support group on Facebook. It is an amazing resource for people to ask questions, share tips, and even grieve together. I have felt my heart break at some of the discussions we have, but we keep it real and it is nice to be in a place where people love you and don’t judge because they have, “been there and done that.”

Seek out and build this network. You’ll gain relief along with the added strength that comes from sharing a heavy burden. I would never have survived if not for the help of my earthly angels. They stood by me as I cried, brainstormed, laughed, strategized, worked, and ate chocolate.

STAY INVOLVED THROUGH SERVICE



What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good.

- Aristotle

ONE OF THE BEST LESSONS I learned was how essential it was to continue to serve, stay involved, and help others. My burdens felt lighter as I helped and served others, and my despair lifted over time. It feels good to be needed.

Service is something that fits into and fills the cracks of our busy lives.

Serving looks differently for each person. The key is to look beyond yourself. Ask, *What are my passions? What skills do I have? Could I be a listening ear for someone else walking down diagnosis road?* That is a good place to begin.

If you are dealing with health challenges, remember to pace yourself. You do need to take care of yourself and perhaps be creative in the way you serve. Maybe you can text or call friends or family when you have little to no energy. Getting out of the house is also a big psychological boost.

Service ideas:

- Write an encouraging note to a friend
- Participate in online support groups or charity events
- Reach out to others going through the same diagnosis
- Put together kits for those pushing through chemo (or any other diagnosis you are passionate about)
- Collect items for shelters or charities (first aid supplies, socks, hygiene supplies)
- Volunteer for church group
- Share a smile with a stranger
- Produce/donate needed items (quilts, blankets, hats, scarfs)
- Volunteer at schools/hospitals
- Index genealogy records online
- Donate cans to a food pantry

Side note for caregivers: Be sure that you have things that you are involved in outside of caring

for your loved one. This is critical to your mental health and allows you a break from the stresses of everyday life. Maybe it is service, maybe it is work, or maybe it is developing a talent. Don't feel guilty for spending some quality "you time" to rejuvenate. You need it and you will be a better caregiver as you take care of yourself.

One of my favorite online videos is a terminally ill, ninety-one-year-old man sitting in a hospital bed, using a hat loom to knit hats for the homeless. He explained it gave him purpose. It also brought him joy to help others. Joseph Addison explained it best when he said, "No one is more cherished in this world than someone who lightens the burden of another."

PLAN FOR STRESS RELIEF



With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die.

– Abraham Lincoln

ANY DIAGNOSIS can cause an increase in stress—whether you are the patient or the caregiver. During this time, stress relief is crucial. There have been days when my anxiety peaked, and I knew I needed a release.

Here is a list of tips which have helped myself and others through the years:

- Meditating
- Deep breathing
- Receiving a massage
- Doing yoga
- Listening to or playing music
- Laughing
- Exercising
- Reading a good book
- Watching happy movies
- Napping
- Journaling
- Taking a walk, hike, or drive
- Getting respite help—if you are a caregiver, make sure you get a break!

Which stress relievers appeal to you?

My favorite stress relievers are walking, singing inspiring music, napping, or reading a fun book.

For example, when stress seems to have my insides churning, I feel the need to walk—and even sporadically run it off. Taking my frustrations out in a positive way, with my feet hitting the pavement, helps calm that churning into a more manageable emotion. It also gives me the natural “high” of the endorphins created by exercising.

Singing at the top of my lungs when I am stressed also helps relieve stress. Not only am I breathing deeply to sing, but singing positive and uplifting songs motivate me.

Books have always been an escape for me. I prefer fantasy, adventure, and a twist of romance because real life stories are sometimes too real for me. I live with raw stress and emotions daily. When I read, I want to find myself in a different place, far away from my own challenges for a moment.

Special note: I don't encourage using drugs, alcohol, binge eating, or scrolling mindlessly through social media as stress relievers. These activities are addicting and will not help you progress through grief. They will only give an addiction on top of a diagnosis. Be wise.

I find it helpful to make a list of healthy stress relieving activities and how long it will take to do them. This is an example of a list I keep on my phone of stress relievers I can do when I take a quick break.

If I have 5 minutes I can:

- walk up and down the stairs a couple of times
- go outside to breathe some fresh air
- listen to my favorite song and sing along
- pray
- read my favorite comic strip

If I have 10 minutes I know I can:

- do a short exercise routine
- read a distracting book (although I have to set a timer when I read)
- journal
- play a game

If I have 20 minutes I can:

- nap
- clean an area of my home (while dancing to music)
- take my dog for a walk
- call a friend to catch up and laugh

Can you see how purposeful planning helps you maximize your relaxation time?

If you are a caregiver—please remember to take care of yourself so that you can continue to take care of others.

No matter what, make a list of stress relievers and pick a few favorites to sprinkle throughout your day. Be sure to tuck a few ideas inside your “Emotional Survival Kit” for particularly challenging days. When emotions run high, practice those favorite stress relief options. They’ll help you survive another day with your sanity intact.

THE BIGGEST TRAP—COMPARISON



Comparison is the thief of joy.

– Theodore Roosevelt

SOME OF MY HEAVIEST MOMENTS came when I compared myself to others. This is one of the easiest and biggest traps that people fall into.

One particularly difficult evening when I was despairing over how much our diagnosis impacted our quality of life, I poured my soul out to God asking why I couldn't have a "normal" family that could do normal things.

The answer whispered in my heart, "Tamara, this is normal for you."

It was a tremendous "ah-ha" moment for me. My life was totally normal for me. Even though it was easy to compare myself to other people and families, I realized that God didn't want me to compare. I was normal for me. Our family was normal for us.

You and I are going to progress through diagnosis in completely unique and different ways because our bodies are different, and our perspectives and experiences are distinctive from anyone else's. We are each incredible, wonderful, and original.

One of the things I notice about comparison is that I always seem to compare my weaknesses to others' strengths. That is like putting an Olympic basketball star next to a gymnast and comparing the two at basketball. They are built differently, they have each worked at developing differing skills and abilities, so the gymnast is never going to be the basketball star.

For some reason this comparison seems so easy to understand, but so hard to apply. Whatever you do, remember when you watch people that you are seeing their best, so don't compare it to your worst.

Don't get discouraged when perhaps the typical treatment may not work for you as it worked for cousin George. We are each different. Keep moving forward and work with your team of health providers to find what does help and work for you or your loved one.

This is YOUR journey, not anyone else's. Don't compare. Everyone is different and will go through life's struggles at a different pace—and this is perfectly okay. You are normal for you.

RESISTANCE TRAINING & JOY



*Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience,
and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.*

– Harriet Tubman

MY MAJOR IN COLLEGE was Therapeutic Recreation. In my course of study I learned about and studied the muscles in the human body. The process by which muscles grow and become stronger was fascinating to me.

If we don't use our muscles, they deteriorate or atrophy. Think about a person who becomes paralyzed. Their muscles shrink because they are not using them.

I learned that if there was no resistance or opposition to the muscle, there was no strength. There must be resistance training for muscles to grow stronger.

The same thing can be said of each of us in life—if we do not use or build our life muscles during times of resistance or trial, we do not grow stronger.

As much as I hated each diagnosis and its ensuing stress upon me and my family, I gradually learned that God was helping me build some life muscles. Now, I know I complained and put up quite a fit. I didn't want to build muscles right then. I wanted to coast along and enjoy life.

But life ebbs and flows. There are times that are strenuous and we are pushing with all our might—like a cyclist pedaling up a giant hill. And there will be times when we get to coast a little down the other side—until we hit the next hill.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to be strong with God and to find joy in the journey.

The principle behind Therapeutic Recreation is to find an activity that the person enjoys so much they won't think about the exercise or pain involved.

For example, we would instigate some competitive games of Balloon Volleyball. Stroke victims were suddenly trying to use both arms because they wanted to get that balloon to the other side of the court. They were building muscles and they didn't even realize it.

I think we can apply this same principle in life. Try to have a little bit of fun daily. You can also search for and find the smallest joyful moments that happen daily: breathing, smelling, eating, laughing, seeing sunny skies after long, dark nights, smiling, or calling/texting loved ones.

One of the elderly ladies at the Rehab Center where I worked was so very happy. I loved working with her and being around her. She was a shining ray of joy.

One particular Veteran's Day, this cheerful woman stood and wept openly as she told us of her husband, whom she married before he left to serve in World War II. Unfortunately, he never returned home from the war, but gave his life in defense of freedom. She never remarried.

This amazingly cheerful woman had figured out a way to build some life muscles during hard times and to come through with joy after experiencing sorrow. She is a shining example that was burned into my memory of someone who could find peace and happiness despite enduring difficult challenges.

She had built strong life muscles amid hardship and come through with joy. I knew I wanted to be just like her "when I grew up" but I would never have picked the sorrow that it took to get there.

When resistance comes into our lives we have a choice, we can face it "happily or unhappily" (as I tell my children). Sometimes we do a little bit of both. Don't let your trials make you bitter. Let your trials make you stronger and choose joy!

CONCLUSION



MY GOAL is to spread hope during hard times. Diagnosis is one of those times when life can get hard. I hope that by sharing these tips with you, you have felt uplifted, been inspired, and are motivated to keep going.

As you move forward, remember these tips:

1. Cling To Normal Routines
2. Be Gentle With Grief
3. Diagnosis Doesn't Define the Person
4. Journaling and Gratitude
5. Pick Good Health Care Professionals
6. Overcome Fear Through Learning
7. Build a Support Network
8. Stay Involved Through Service
9. Plan for Stress Relief
10. The Biggest Trap—Comparison
11. Forget the Future—Focus on Today
12. Resistance Training & Joy

You will have hard days and you will have good days along your diagnosis journey. But no matter what you do, keep moving forward. Don't you give up. Never give up!

I know you probably would not have chosen this path. I wouldn't have either. But the experience and knowledge we gain trudging this path less traveled helps us become stronger, more capable, more compassionate, more loving, more kind, more thoughtful, more grateful, more wise, more real. You are **more** because you are on this journey.

The price for wisdom is experience—and you are having lots of experiences right now.

I invite you to share your nuggets of wisdom with those you encounter along the diagnosis road. Become a beacon of hope to those who are struggling. Love freely. Journey with joy.

When you feel weak, pray for strength. The truth is we are never strong enough to make this journey alone. The challenges we face in life will always be too hard, but they are never too hard for God. So, yoke yourself to Him and He will help you carry your heavy burden.

“When you're in a dark place, you sometimes tend to think you've been buried.

Perhaps you've been planted.

Bloom!”

I LOVE this quote! I have felt buried at many points in my life, and just like the bulbs that have to exert all their effort to push their green chutes heavenward at the Spring thaw, I too have had to push heavenward in those dark times.

What happens next is the miracle of turning to God in hard times—you do indeed bloom in spite of and perhaps because of the most difficult challenges in life. Bloom my friends! Bloom!

No matter what, keep trudging up your mountain. Ride your diagnosis roller-coaster with faith and knowledge, not fear and despair. You can do this! I believe in you!

CALL TO ACTION



If you have been inspired by this book, please tell others about it. Together we can help each other survive any life detours and diagnosis because we know we aren't alone.

I love to hear from my readers. You can contact me on my website: tamarakanderson.com.

Do you have a story to share about what God has taught you? Do you know someone I should interview on my podcast, *Stories of Hope in Hard Times*? Please feel free contact me at:

tamarakanderson.com

[instagram.com/tamarakanderson](https://www.instagram.com/tamarakanderson)

[facebook.com/tamarakanderson](https://www.facebook.com/tamarakanderson)

Twitter: [@tamarakanderson](https://twitter.com/tamarakanderson)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TAMARA LOVES READING stories with happy endings, conducting choirs, and juggling the activities of her four children. She is the mother of three boys (two of which are on the autism spectrum) and one girl. Raising her brood is a full-time job! Tamara loves learning—both in and out of the classroom, but prefers reading books for fun. She has lived in the east, south, and west of the United States and even in Argentina for three years as a young girl. Tamara enjoys podcasting, gardening, writing, singing, chocolate, and going on dates with her husband, Justin.