



In English, we call an obvious issue that we don't discuss because it makes us uncomfortable an "elephant in the room." A terminal illness is an example: Many people would prefer not to talk about the fact that they or their loved ones are dying.

But, imagine how hard it would be to know that your days numbered and not have anyone to talk to about it. Now imagine the relief you'd feel if you were given permission to say whatever was on your heart in a circle of people who shared your experience.

That relief is what the members of our "Dying without the elephant" circle feel, and they want to share their stories with you. They hope that, by talking freely about their own deaths, you'll feel encouraged to talk about your own.

These stories have touched my heart deeply, and I hope you find them as meaningful as I have.

Lindsay Espejel

Lindsay Espejel
Co-director
Healing Circles Global

**An elephant-sized
impact**
page 2

**The gift of living
with cancer**
page 3

The tightrope
pages 4-5

**Sitting at the feet
of masters**
page 6



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An elephant-sized impact

by David Talmor

I could say that participating in the “Dying Without the Elephant” healing circle changed my life, but that would be an understatement. It changed my death, which turns out to have an even greater impact.

I have what Robin Williams had: Lewy Body Dementia. At this stage, I’m experiencing mild cognitive impairment or MCI, which has brought me many “golden moments.” The brain-driven life I lived before my diagnosis has started to make way for something besides the cognitive. Now, when something happens, it first goes through my guts where I FEEL and have an initial connection/response to it, and only then does my mind get involved in thinking it through.

MCI has put me in a place that I value and will be glad to stay in for as long as possible. However, I’ve made a clear and absolute decision to end my life before I reach what I call the “black line.” I joined the circle with the understanding that being dead by suicide because of dementia was the same as being dead because of a different disease. It turns out that I got the dead part right, but I got the life part wrong, and that has been one of the biggest impacts of this circle for me.

The hosts of the elephant circle took a group of very different people, along with a very challenging topic, and created an almost unimaginable level of openness, sense of security, and feeling of connection among us. With this in place and strengthening each time we meet, the elephant circle has flourished.

Participating in such a group has been incredibly moving and special. Hearing other circle



David Talmor in a shirt of his own creation

members tell about their illnesses and how they, their families, and friends deal with those illnesses was beyond anything I had ever been part of. In one circle, each of us shared what we planned for our actual death-time, and it wasn’t “hypothetical” at all. Each of us talked through how we were preparing for what we all knew was coming.

The elephant circle is hosted by three death doulas: people with experience in the dying process who can help with planning and even step in at certain points. It occurred to me that I am a self-doula. A self-doula designs her or his own dying process and carries it out. This is giving me an amazing immediacy to living. As my death becomes part of my life and my life becomes part of my death, I feel they are both far fuller for it.

I went into the elephant circle as a person with early-stage dementia facing deterioration until reaching death. From everything that happened in the circle, I say with a completely full heart (and with eyes full of tears of emotion) “I am in a beautiful place.” 🌿

The gift of living with cancer

by Petra Martin

Christine was first diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 39, and when it recurred at 42, her doctors told her she probably wouldn't survive. Now, at 80, she's lived with cancer for more than half her life.

"When I didn't die after all the chemo and radiation, I decided to get to know myself better and to honor all my feelings, even the ones like anger and sadness," she says. "Cancer was so horrible that my feelings were finally justified. When I went inside myself, I found a really beautiful person, a person I could love, my true self. That's the gift cancer gave me."

Christine is a member of a healing circle called "Dying without the elephant." Although she participates in other support groups, she says, "The elephant circle is my favorite. There, I talk freely about what I'm going through. My love for the people in the group is stronger than the fear of my own death. It makes me feel closer to friends outside the group and gives me courage."

When Christine was 21, her mother died of pancreatic cancer, and no one acknowledged the truth of her diagnosis, including her doctor. "We all knew she was dying, but no one would talk about it," Christine says. "I don't want my children to go through what I went through with my mother."

Christine says that many people are unable to lean into the reality that she's dying and are unwilling to accept her own acceptance of it.



Christine Flagler

"The ones who say, 'You're going to be OK' can't think about their own death, so they can't think about mine," she says. "I don't want to hurt someone with my diagnosis, but at the same time, I don't want to hide it."

"My goal is to be authentically who I am," Christine continues. "I just want to have faith that my true self can handle anything. If I can be in my true self and be authentically who I am and what I'm meant to be – a loving person, caring about myself – if I can stay in that space, then I can be around people who are scared and maybe help them. The last day of my life is still going to have meaning. There's still something I'm going to learn, even at the end."

In the second half of her life, Christine looks for opportunities to share her story and feelings.

"It brings me joy," she says, and "I think it might help people who are struggling with the same journey." 🌿

The tightrope

by Lori Tupper

Every morning, I wake up and walk the line to the bathroom (as most people do), but two years ago, when I was diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, the line became a tightrope.

My balance became very important to me as the cancer has spread to my bones, making them vulnerable to falls. On one side of my tightrope, I see the end goal of “living well,” and on the other side of my tightrope, I see the end goal of “dying well.” Every day, I try to hold both concepts tightly, knowing that a fall could affect my end game.

What does it mean to me to “live well?” I started working “tax-contributing” jobs when I was 15 and worked until I was 59 (with three years off for parenting, school, cancer treatment, and travel.) So, I feel like it’s okay for me to do the things I enjoy in my retirement. That means I spend my days with friends, reading, writing, playing mindless games on my phone, watching television, entertaining friends, dancing, visiting my grandkids (and my kids), cooking, baking, and several other “fun” things. I’m blessed to be able to surround myself with people who enjoy many of the same things I enjoy and people who radiate positive energy. I’ve gradually eliminated negative-energy “radiators,” and find each day filled with happiness and joy!

Another aspect of “living well” for me is intense celebrations of a life well-enjoyed. My first celebration, in August of 2022, was one of the happiest days of my life. Many people came to celebrate ME which reinforced how many blessings I’ve been granted since July 10, 1959.



Lori Tupper

Because my quarterly scans have been “stable” (meaning no spreading of cancer), I’ve decided to “step up” my “living well” with more parties.

I had my second celebration of life yesterday, and it was part of my “dying well” regimen. What is the most important thing we feel when we’re dying? My answer is, “It’s important for me to know that I was loved and that I made a difference by being here.”

Another important part of my “dying well,” regimen was finding a support group that lifted my spirits and was willing to dialog honestly about our unique journeys. I’ve found that support group through the Commonwealth organization based in California. I’m part of a Zoom support group called a “healing circle” that meets twice a month. We’re comprised of four members with terminal diagnoses and three facilitators who are certified “death doulas.” It’s such a gift to meet with these people and discuss our mortality and what it’s teaching us. These precious people have taught me more than I could ever have learned on my own. But I

The tightrope cont.

think what I appreciate most is the positivity present in the spirit of these seven souls. Our group is called, "Dying without the elephant (in the room)" and we have recognized many feelings of struggle, resilience, pains, anticipations, dreads, and tolerances, but mostly appreciation, happiness, euphoria, and acceptance.

What gifts could possibly be associated with any terminal illnesses? Well, THAT is what I really want you to pay attention to in this message. Let me share with you the gifts I've discovered in the last two and a half years:

- I get to tell my friends and family how much I love them and how much I will miss them.
- I get to apologize for things I may have done to hurt others.
- I get to thank people for being in my life, for helping to create who I am, and for the part they played in my awesome life experiences.
- I get to deliberate for days, weeks, or months about special gifts that I want to buy for friends and family to help them remember and feel close to me for the rest of their lives.
- I get to tell people I love them as much as I want to. My days are numbered and it makes sense for me to put those words out there as much as possible.
- I get to focus on the legacy I want to leave behind, including books so my family can read my "crazy stories" for many years to come.
- I get to choose how I want my death to be and choose who will surround me as I embrace this sacred transition.
- I get to have really awesome parties to celebrate who I am with people who actually like me.
- I get to model to my world a way to die well and maybe help alleviate the fear of dying for others.
- I get to have fun just doing the things I'm doing (traveling, spending time with grandkids, lots of lunches with people I love).
- Every moment with my soulmate Michael is special, and we try to mindfully appreciate those moments as they happen.
- I get to say "no" to anything and people are okay with that.
- I get to connect with others who are terminally ill and have conversations that lift my spirit and connect me to the core of others
- I get to prepare my spirit energy for something bigger and better!

Perhaps the most important thing I'm doing is trying to spend as much time as I can with my five grandchildren. I want to live long enough for them all to remember me.

In 2022, after I was diagnosed, I spent an entire week home alone grieving. I walked (stomped at times) around the house sobbing and wailing, rested for a bit, then did more of the same.

But the tightrope appeared, and I realized I was about to learn and experience things that I would never have experienced without my diagnosis. Then one day, it became clear that a new balance was necessary in my life.

For that, I'm incredibly thankful! As I walk the line back from the bathroom each morning to my bed (usually to cuddle more with my soulmate), I know that when I get up to begin my day, I will walk my tightrope of balance. 🌿

Sitting at the feet of masters

by Nicci de Wet-du Toit
Cohost of "Dying without the elephant"

Death in all forms has been a part of my life since I was a six-year old growing up in South Africa. Each death felt like something that was connected to me got lost or broke off. I was drawn to discussions about death and found it odd and irritating that no one wanted to talk about how it fits into society, how we can honor it, and how sacred, special, terrifying, and magical it is. Death is such a mystery. Being with someone when they die is one of the biggest privileges any person can experience.

Accepting the reality that we all die and actively helping people who are in the process of dying deepened my gratitude for this moment in a way that's hard to explain. I changed the face of my watch and inserted a disc that reads "NOW." When someone asks the time, it is "now." Every day, I also build a mini holiday into my schedule.

I prefer to spend time with people who choose to be aware of, or at least consider, their mortality. I've found that sweating the small stuff is such a waste of precious time. The choice to listen, be open, and say "yes" to life is far more exhilarating than most other things. By being aware of the reality that we all die, I'm also deeply aware of how interactions with others need to be loving, and how getting angry shortens my life and reduces my joy.

The wisdom of each person is indescribable. It feels as if I am sitting at the feet of masters. Perhaps, the wisdom seeps through the vulnerability they display.



Nicci de Wet-du Toit

Their support for each other and friendship is completely unconditional, and it makes me think that THIS is how friendship should be. This is what unconditional looks like. I want to be like that. I've also been surprised to witness the visible, almost tangible, ongoing development of each person since the circle began. This experience has made each participant stronger, more daring, more "out there."

Thanks to this circle, I approach everything with about 100 percent more self-confidence. I'm confident that things don't have to be perfect, and I enjoy a heap of added humor. I take things less seriously, yet, more seriously. I tell people I love them when I say goodbye on the phone or when we greet at gatherings, and I make regular phone calls every Sunday evening to a long list of people for a check-in. I don't say yes to things I don't want to do, and I do say yes to as many things that make my heart sing as possible. I'm more direct and real with people. The elephant circle deepened my gratitude and changed my entire approach to life. 🌱