

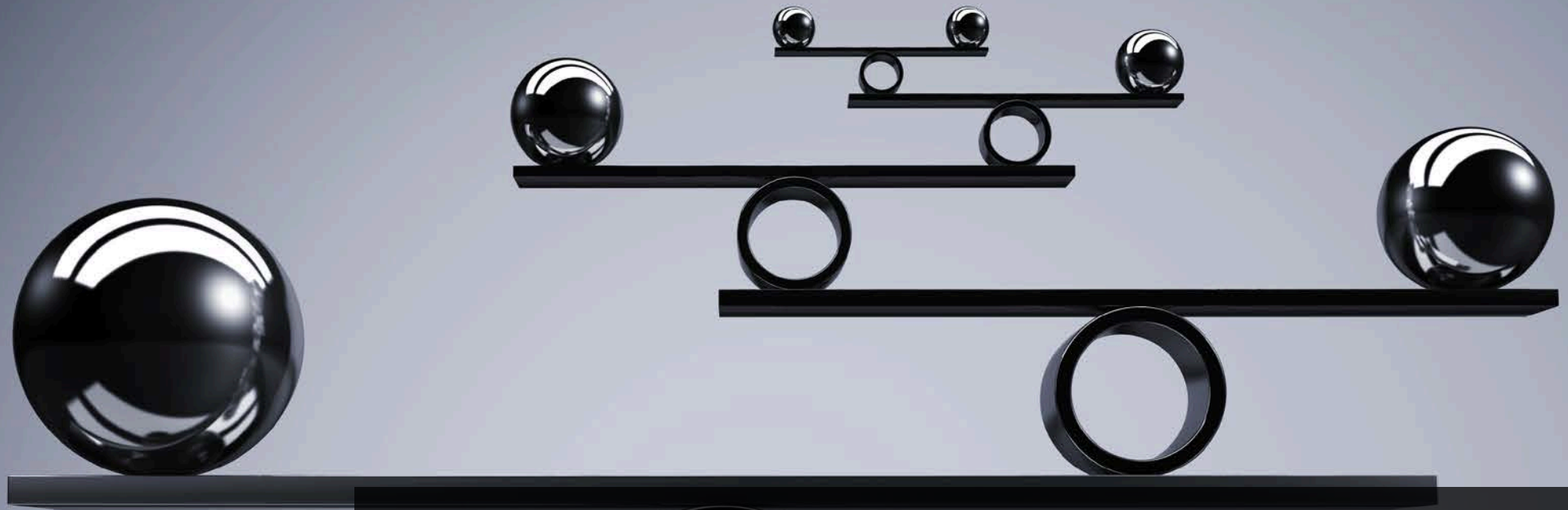
# FEAR OF CANCER RECURRENCE (FCR)

---

MARNEY HOFFMAN, PH.D.  
HOFFMAN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

# TOPICS COVERED

- Fear of cancer recurrence (FCR) Explained
- Exploring the severity of FCR
- What is all the fear about?
- Common FCR triggers
- Biology of Fear
- Negative Bias: We're hardwired for negativity
- Rewiring the brain: Neuroplasticity
- Practical tips to manage FCR



---

# THE CANCER JOURNEY

# FEAR OF CANCER RECURRENCE EXPLAINED

---

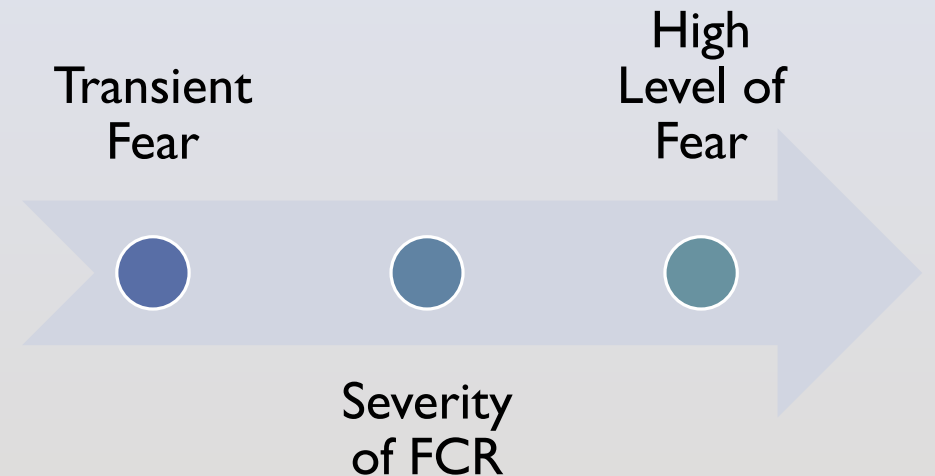
- “Fear, worry, or concern about the cancer returning or progressing” (Lebel et al, 2016, p. 3267)
- Affects 50-70% of cancer survivors across all cancer subtypes
- FCR/Progression was confirmed to be prevalent among ovarian cancer survivors and that women felt insufficient support in managing the fear (Ozga et al, 2015)
- Most unmet need for women ovarian cancer survivors (Tan et al, 2020)



# SEVERITY OF FCR

---

- Transient fear
  - Occasional thoughts & feelings that cancer could come back. Thoughts are fleeting. These thoughts are unpleasant but manageable
- High level of fear
  - Preoccupation or worry that is persistent, intrusive thoughts, and hypersensitivity to body sensations. These are difficult to manage and last for at least 3 months and interfere with daily functioning and overall well-being. Can lead to anxiety disorders, PTSD and depression.
  - Maladaptive coping strategies, seeking excessive reassurance from medical professionals, avoiding medical appointments (Mutsaers et al, 2020)





## WHAT IS THE FEAR ABOUT

---

- Taking more time off work, family life, financial impact
- Coping with more treatment
- Fear of loss of control
- Scared of suffering
- What does it mean for children, partners, and other family members
- Loss, grief, and possible death.

# FCR TRIGGERS

---

Follow up appointments

Anniversary dates of diagnosis, ending treatment

Hearing someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer

Developing symptoms that you cannot explain such as abdominal pain, sore throat, headache etc.

Having long term side effects such as fatigue

Life events of others

Any stressful event – financial difficulties, job changes, relationship challenges

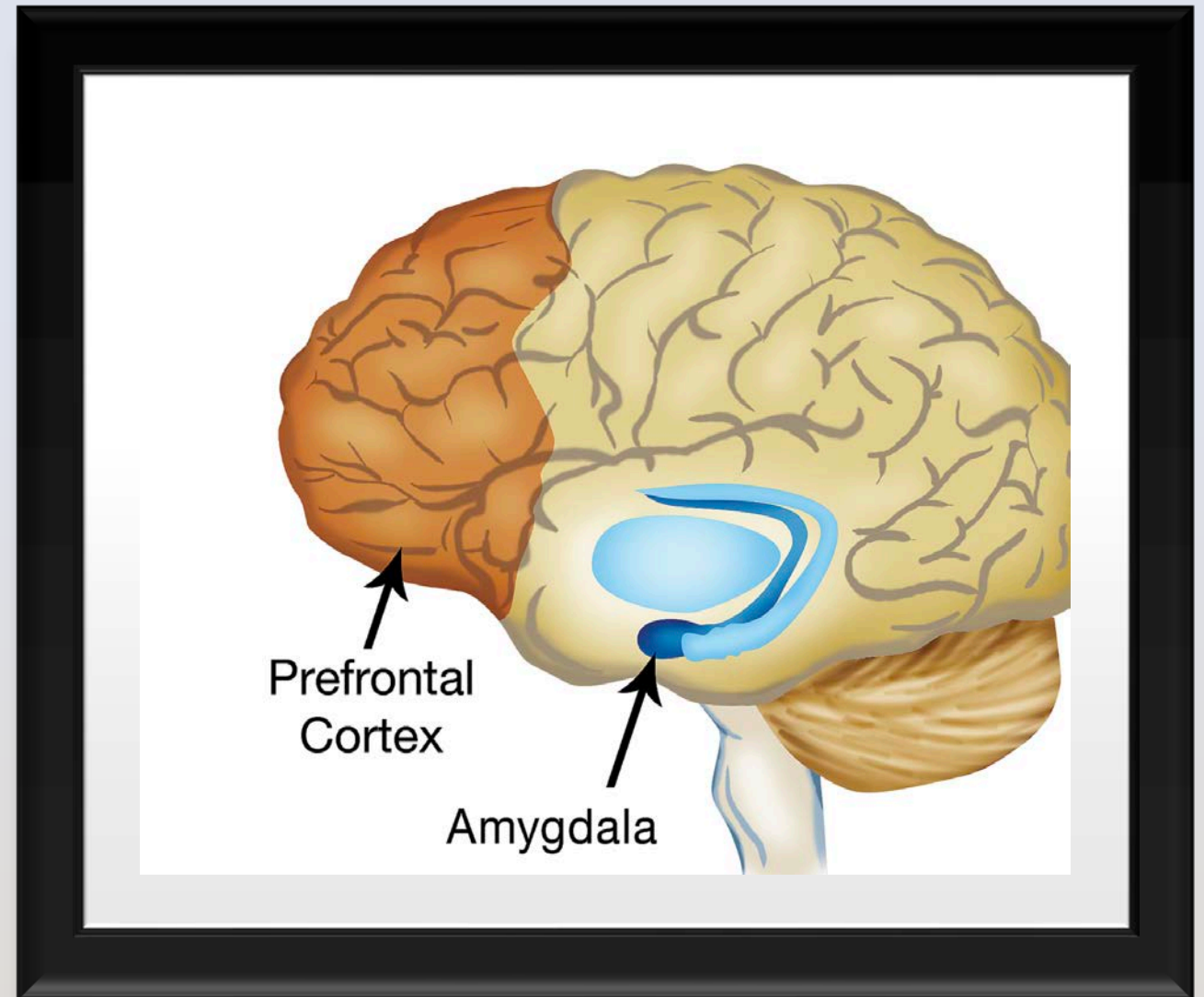
# BIOLOGY OF FEAR

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

---

### **Amygdala** (*emotional mind*)

- When triggered it goes into fight/flight or freeze mode - Sympathetic nervous system
- Processes emotions particularly fearful emotions
- Houses our emotional memory (can cause sensitivity to this area)
- Attention is fixated in a particular way – More impulsive reactions when appraising information





# NEGATIVITY BIAS

---



- Propensity to give more weight in our minds to things going wrong
- Our minds can become hijacked in the negative
- Overcoming negative bias is not easy but is possible

# BIOLOGY OF FEAR

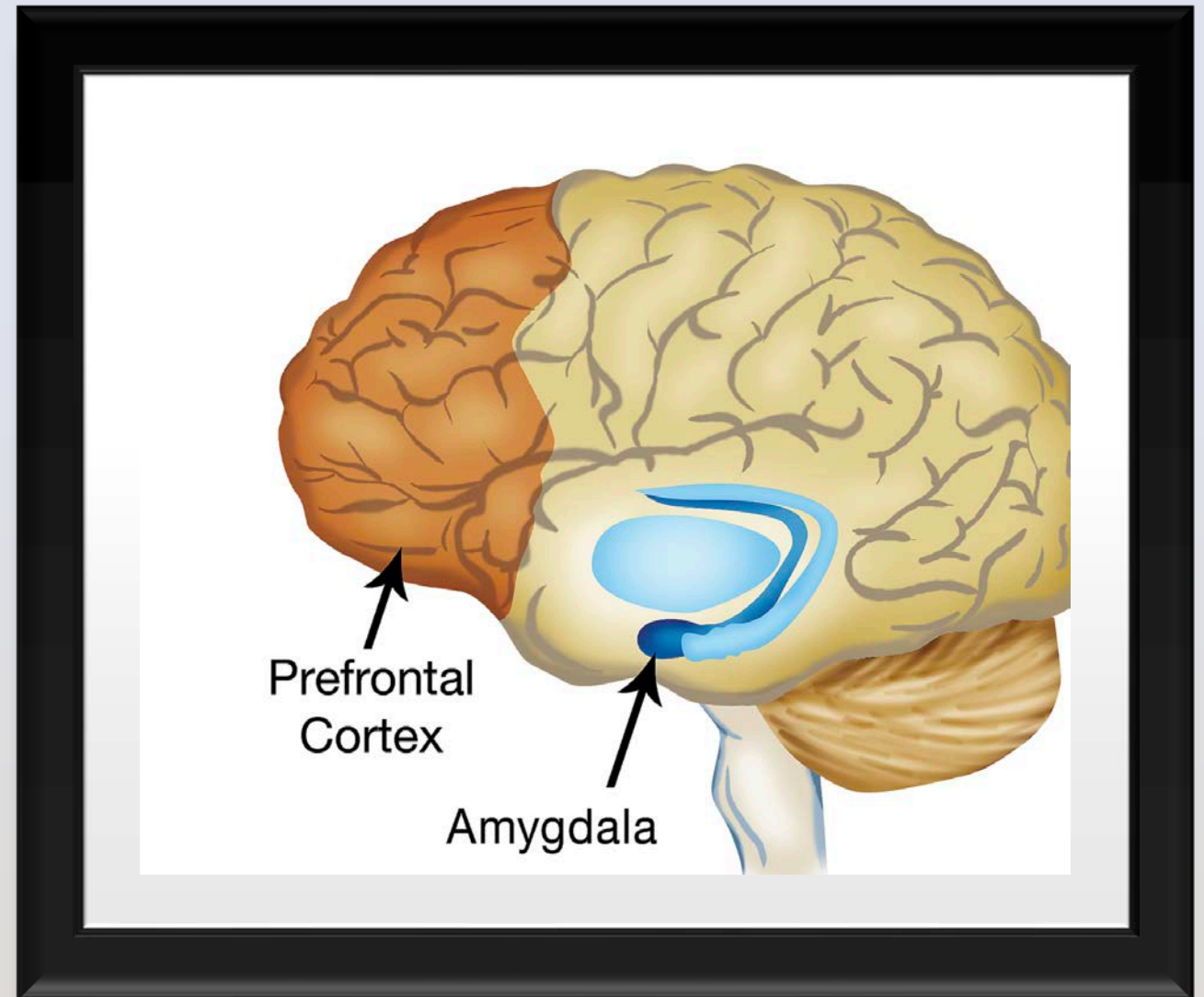
## HOW DOES IT WORK?

---

### **Prefrontal Cortex** (*logical mind*)

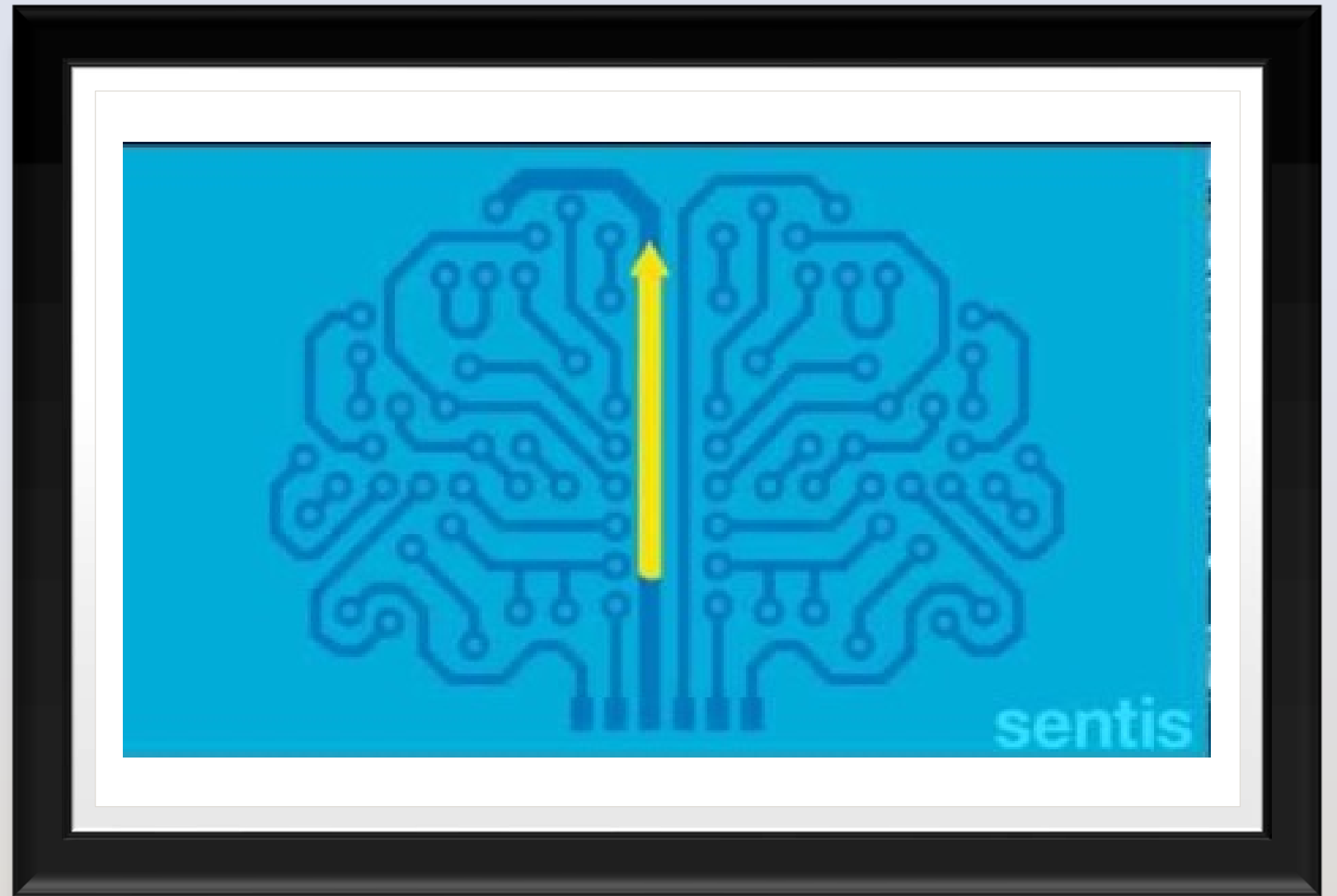
- Executive functions: attention, self-control, planning, problem-solving, decision-making
- It's the part of brain that cools down emotions – parasympathetic nervous system
- Receives sensory information to plan responses and then communicates it to other areas of the brain to enact a response

**Emotional Mind + Logical Mind = Wise Mind**



# REWIRING THE BRAIN

---



## Benefits include:

- Neurocircuitry to work – Wise mind activates
- Improved self-awareness
- Better communication
- Interactions with others are more satisfying
- Have more compassion with self & others

## Practice self-care:

- Exercise 21 min a day (150 min weekly)
- Follow anti-inflammatory diet
- Get enough sleep (7-8 hours a night)
- Implement relaxation/meditation/breathing practice
- Be in nature
- Touch as healing – releases oxytocin which has a calming effect and influences emotions

---

**REWIRE THE BRAIN:**

**CREATE CONDITIONS  
FOR CALM**

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING FCR

---

- Practicing Mindfulness in Everyday life
  - Live in the moment
  - Being aware of internal events (thoughts & feelings) without any attempt to judge them, react or suppress them.
  - Just notice “what is” with curiosity
- Implement a Mindfulness Meditation Practice
  - Breathing exercises, guided imagery, body scan, walking meditation, sitting mediation

***“Meditation is about stopping and being present, that it all”***  
***~ Jon Kabat-Zin***



# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING FCR

---



## **Recognize and have a plan for your triggers**

Recognize triggered moments are difficult. Ask yourself, “what do I need right now?” Give your self some grace.

**It’s okay to not be okay!**



## **Normalize and talk about the fears (listen too!)**

Remember that family members often try to protect each other by not sharing how they feel.

Let others know what you need.



## **Begin a worry diary or journal**

Writing your worries can help. As you do it you it provides an opportunity to observe, discover and organize your thoughts. Helps gain perspective and it’s a way to release them.



## **Examine your automatic thoughts**

Is a distorted belief contributing to my fear?

What’s the evidence that this thought is true? Evidence it is false? What is an alternative thought?

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING FCR

---

## Postpone your worry

- Create a worry period (not more than 20 min)
- Worry at the designated "worry time" each day.
- If you have worries after that time, write the down for the next day.

## Acceptance of where you are

- Acceptance doesn't mean liking the situation
- It is the ability to be as you are and feel what you feel
- You are doing the best you can
- Practice self-compassion

## Take steps to open the scary box

- Process your cancer journey.
- Unpack the experience and sit with the feelings.
- It can provide relief

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING FCR

---

## Remember times of resiliency

Defined: the ability to recover from difficulties and challenges

Think about past challenges you've gotten through

## Focus on what you have

Reduce fear by focusing on what you still have.

You can have many losses due to cancer and still live a good life with meaning and purpose

Begin a gratitude journal

## Practice Loving Kindness

Defined: a mindful practice designed to increase love and compassion for our selves.

Can protect us from holding onto ill will, judgmental, hostile feelings

May I be healthy, May I be safe, May I be happy



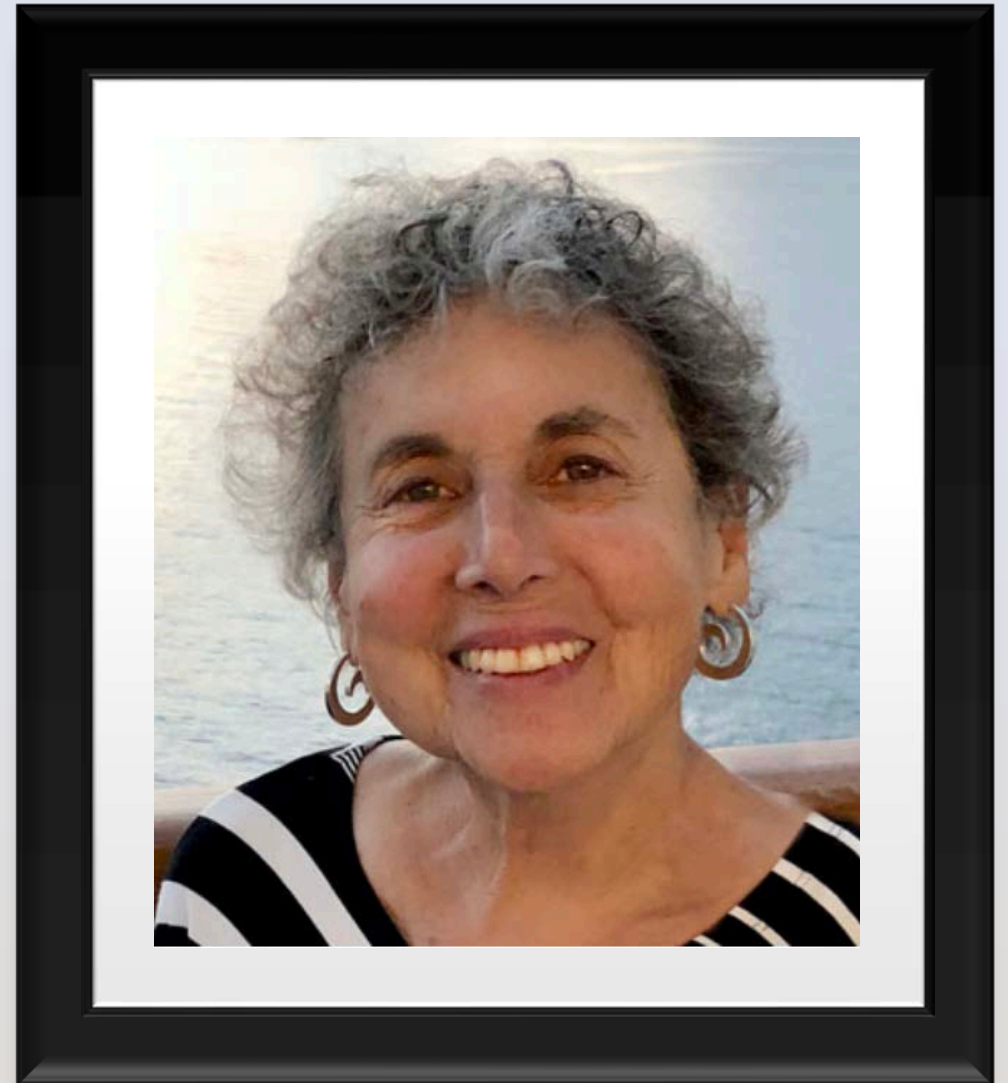
# ELANA ROSENBAUM, LICSW

PSYCHOLOGIST, MINDFULNESS TEACHER, CANCER PATIENT  
AUTHOR: "BEING WELL, EVEN WHEN YOU'RE SICK" (2012)

---

"There are times when anxiety is unavoidable. I am always anxious before I have a new CT-scan. I only relax after the doctor sees me and tells me the results. **I Find it easier to cope with the recurrence than worry about it.** I've learned to say to myself, "I'll get through this", and I know I have, three times already. I was very anxious before my stem cell transplant. I calmed once I was in the hospital. There was no other choice if I wanted to be well. **On a moment-to-moment basis, reality is manageable; staying in my head and imagining what could happen is not.** (p.45)."

*Diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma and 3 recurrences since 1995.*





# RESOURCES

---

[www.hoffmanbehavioralhealth.com](http://www.hoffmanbehavioralhealth.com)