

# Coping with Your Diagnosis

When you hear the words ‘You have cancer,’ it can be a shattering and overwhelming moment. You may feel paralysed or shocked, or it may confirm a suspicion that you already had. Initially, you might not be able to process the information; or conversely, you may be questioning how and what will happen next. Questions such as ‘How much time do I have?’ ‘What are my chances?’ and ‘How do I tell my family and friends?’ may all reign supreme.

I know of one person, via a colleague, who was diagnosed and basically told to get his affairs in order and say goodbye to family and friends. This must have been devastating. Thankfully, he obtained a second opinion, underwent treatment, and is now eight years clear of cancer.

It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to react, feel, or think when you are diagnosed. We are all different; however, when faced with shocking news or a traumatic experience, as human beings, we tend to have three main reactions:

## **Freeze, flight, and fight**

These are ingrained in our evolution. If we go back to cave-people times, when facing a sabretoothed tiger, we would generally have the following potential reactions:

**Freeze** – This is not the greatest reaction, as Mr Tiger would probably have his dinner served *sans* plate! However, for some of us, the initial impact of the diagnosis can be so traumatic that it renders us powerless, overwhelmed and immobile. We may feel paralysed with questions such as ‘Why me?’ ‘Did I do something wrong?’ ‘Could I have prevented this?’ ‘What am I going to do?’ ‘Will I die?’ and ‘How long have I got?’

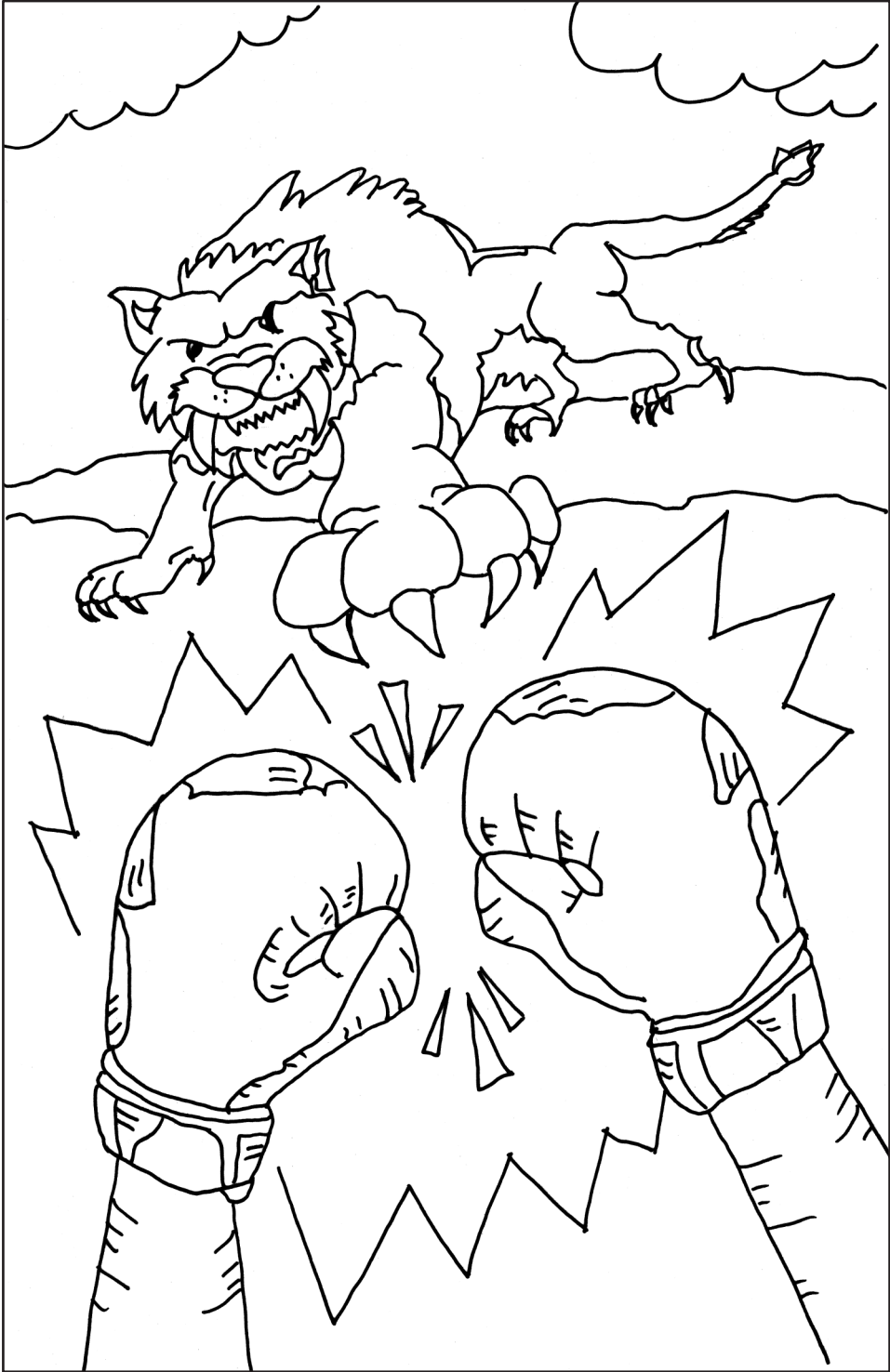
We can feel as though we are disassociated, that this is not happening, that this is surreal, and that if we just ignore it, then maybe it will go away. Unfortunately, the diagnosis will not just go away. We need to take steps to initially just breathe, take time out to come to terms with our new reality, and then begin to look at how we can best respond rather than react to our situation. When we react, we often find that we make a situation worse for ourselves. By responding, taking stock, taking time out, and then thinking about how we are going to cope, we can make the situation a lot easier to deal with.

**Flight** – This is a really good survival strategy in situations in which we are facing Mr Tiger. Unfortunately, with cancer, it doesn't work, as the nastiness is within us rather than external to us. This reaction, though part of the human condition, is one of panic, anxiety, fear and worry and is pretty common with a cancer diagnosis.

Naturally, either at this stage or throughout, we may experience several thoughts such as 'What will happen to me?' 'What happens next?' 'Will it hurt?' 'What about my family, friends, work?' and the list can go on. These can be extremely confrontational thoughts. Most often, we want to avoid this situation and wish it would just disappear, or hope we can run away and escape it. You can run, but you can't hide from it! Cancer won't go away unless we have some form of treatment, and during this time, the focus needs to be on what you can actually control. That might involve moving to the next type of reaction – one a little more helpful than the other two. The sooner you get to this, the better your head space and attitude will be during this journey.

**Fight** – This is my preferred option! Get in there and fight! (not physically but psychologically). This is your life! So get your game plan on!!! Although you might want to engage in contemplating your navel about who or what is to blame (and others around you may be doing this as well), the bottom line is that you have cancer. It honestly does not matter how you may or may not have contracted this awful condition. It does not serve you, or others, to engage in the blame game. You may feel angry, frustrated, and overwhelmed by the whole gig, but the quicker you can accept the idea that you have cancer, the sooner you can start to fight this horrible disease.

Now, fight doesn't mean to literally fight other people – that will only result in a bloody nose when someone inevitably bops you back! Fight means to pause, breathe deeply, and then gain a perspective on how you can get through this challenge. Remember at all times that you are doing your best. When you get a cancer diagnosis, life completely changes. You will change (unless you are a robot ... and if that is the case, you probably don't have cancer), and you will never be the same person again. This can be a good thing, especially when you consider the concept of post-traumatic growth. (More on this later.) If you get into fight mode, you give yourself a chance, and you may just come through this challenge. You can get into the game and fight!





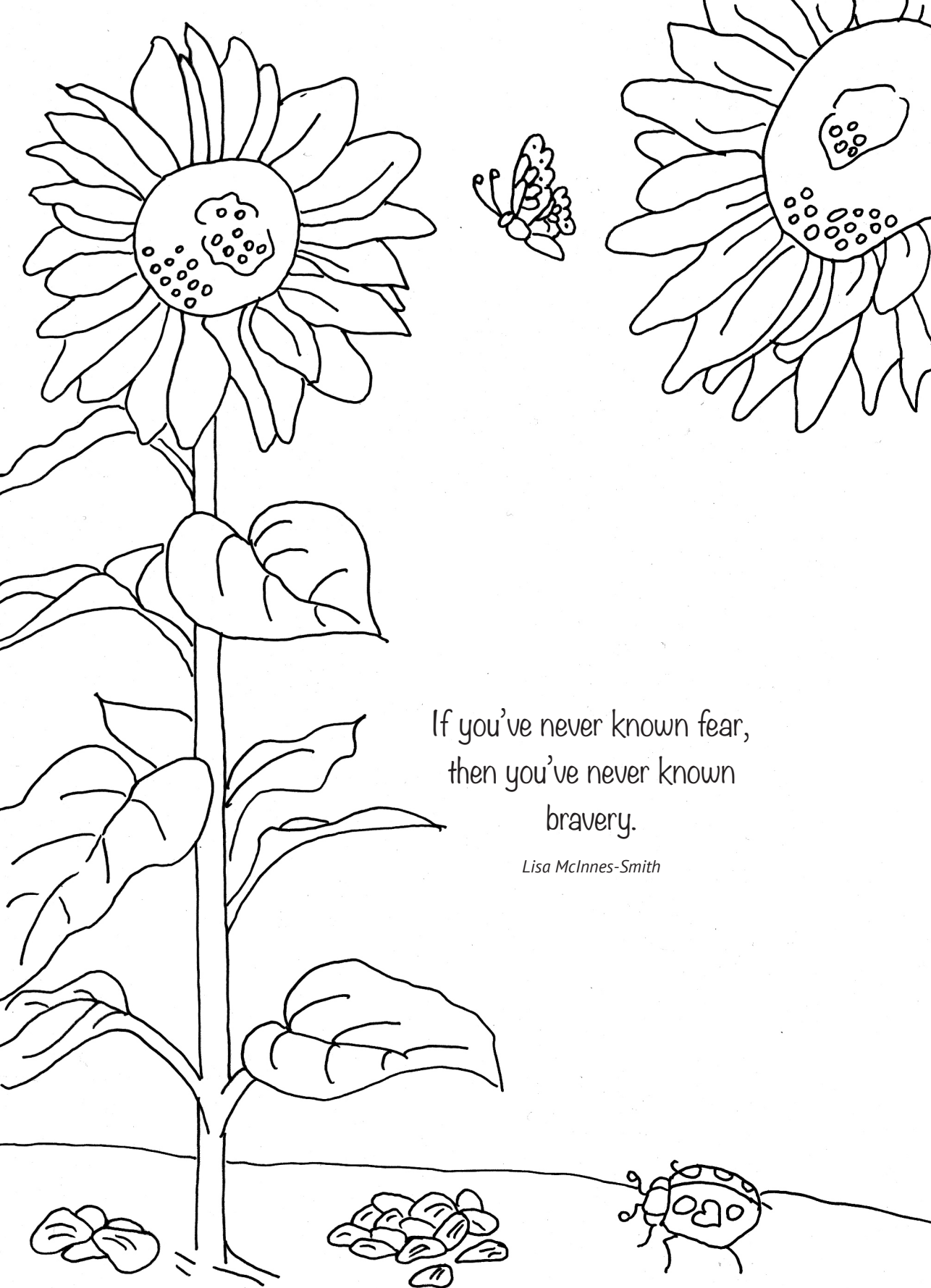
## **Coping with a terminal diagnosis**

When they say 'Get your affairs in order,' yes, there are the practicalities that most people will think of: ensuring that your will is up to date; that your finances, insurance, work and business affairs are organised; that you have a succession plan in the event you are self-employed, for example. More important, I feel, is that you plan what you choose to do with the time you have. Who do you want to spend this time with? What do you want to be doing? Do you want to continue doing what you normally do, to feel a sense of control or purpose? Do you want to be doing meaningful or fun things with the people who are important to you? Do you want to throw a pre-wake party? This seems to be an increasingly popular decision – why should you miss your party? There are no right or wrong answers or decisions. It is entirely up to you what you choose.

As pragmatic teenagers, Gail and I talked about death and dying. She had a healthy sense of religious beliefs that I think gave her some strength around the whole situation. When I visited her in Carnarvon, Gail and I devised Plan A and Plan B. Plan A, if she survived, involved us both doing well at school, enrolling for university, and then after living in a residential college for a time while getting to know Perth (being country kids unfamiliar with the city), moving into a flat together. Plan B, in the event she didn't make it, was me doing the same except that I would have to try to live for both of us. Although Gail was not the partying type, I interpreted this to mean I would also have to party for both of us, which I was quite successful at!

Coping with a terminal diagnosis is difficult, and again we are all different. For most people, receiving this news can be absolutely devastating, although in my experience, it is not the part about death that usually frightens us the most. It is generally worry about those we will leave behind, be it a partner, family, children, friends, or pets. One client I worked with before her diagnosis, and then later while she was in palliative care, worried how her two daughters and husband would cope once she was gone. She was aware that she would pass; however, these worries were what kept her awake at night. It was too confronting for her to talk to any of them about her concerns, as they were all just trying to cope as best they could given their individual circumstances. I would sit as her psychologist and talk through all of her fears and hopes for them. I do like to think, and do believe, that it did bring her some resolution and peace. If you get a

terminal diagnosis then it is important to find someone you can talk to about these concerns; whether that be a friend, psychologist, social worker, priest, chaplain, or a service such as LifeLine or Samaritans. Again, we are all different – some people may want to talk and others may prefer not to.



If you've never known fear,  
then you've never known  
bravery.

*Lisa McInnes-Smith*