



FINDING THE WORDS

If you're reaching for a metaphor when talking about cancer, ask someone who has experienced it what works for them. Here are some possible alternatives (*with commentary from Matthew Miller*).

CANCER JOURNEY

"That's the one I use. It helps capture the entire experience. Journeys can suck, and it doesn't cover that up."

MARATHON

"I like that it ties into just how difficult and long [cancer treatment] is, but also about how you have to maintain the course and move forward one step at a time."

DANCING WITH YOUR DISEASE

"A friend of my mom's who has cancer talks about it this way. She also describes [her illness] as a cloud or a storm in the distance. It's always there, but it's not necessarily raining right now."

Society invites you to "Be a Cancer Fighter" by hosting a fundraising event. Survivors, friends and family participate in the annual Enbridge "Ride to Conquer Cancer," a cycling event that benefits the Alberta Cancer Foundation. (The Foundation notes that the franchise event is an exception to its brand guidelines, and it works hard to avoid militaristic language and focus on more positive, collaborative words such as "facing cancer.") Isenberg-Grzeda adds that U.S. President Richard Nixon officially declared "war on cancer" back in 1971, with a bill that substantially increased funding for

cancer research.

"The fact they chose that marketing strategy was not by accident," Isenberg-Grzeda says. "People are happy to rally around this enemy."

The battle metaphor becomes more problematic when it's removed from the realm of fundraising and applied to the individual experience. Like Miller, Isenberg-Grzeda says battle metaphors are inherently judgmental, implying winning or losing, triumph or surrender. "It's a pretty awful legacy to attach to somebody who died from cancer," he says.

Moreover, cancer is a diverse and complex disease with a wildly varied

treatment process. In this context, reducing the disease to a simple, conquerable foe is misleading. "Not all cancers are curable by the time they are diagnosed," says Isenberg-Grzeda. "The most important inaccuracy [of the battle metaphor] is that people are left thinking that cancer is 'beatable' when often it's not."

So, what should a supportive friend or family member do? How do you know if your words are supportive or harmful? Isenberg-Grzeda says the best rule of thumb is to follow the patient's lead: "Don't use metaphors until the patient uses them first." **LEAP**