



How to help children express their feelings about cancer – Laura Lane’s interview with Author Tiffany Berg Coughran – Full Transcript

January 15, 2020 / Childhood Cancer, Hope Strength Courage Podcast

[Music – Sending a Line by Fiz Anthony]

Thank you for tuning into the Hope Strength Courage Podcast. Love and support for parents whose kids are fighting for their lives! A weekly podcast created to support parents and caregivers of children diagnosed with cancer. Where you will find resources collected to help you face each day with Hope, Strength and Courage. From interviews with the top experts in their fields: doctors, psychologists, chaplains and inspiring frontline workers in pediatric oncology as they share their best advice, as well as day to day advice collected from other cancer moms and leaders in personal growth and development. From individuals who understand how hard it can be, I hope you will feel better prepared to cope with the day-to-day challenges of caring for your child.

Hi, I am Laura Lane, and I am your host. My own daughter Celeste was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 12. In 2015 I wrote about our experiences in the book “Two Mothers One Prayer: Facing your child’s cancer with Hope Strength and Courage”. Since that time, I have dedicated thousands of hours to share with other parents and caregivers the resources, tools, tips, skills and strategies I learned that helped our family to stay happier, healthier and more hopeful. My goal is to share with you my interviews with experts to support you as you care for a child with cancer.

[Music ends]

Today’s episode #3 features my interview with Tiffany Berg Coughran, certified chaplain and professional consultant. In this interview, Tiffany shared with me how she came to write the children’s book “If Cancer was a fish, I’d throw it back” after her husband died of cancer as well as the colouring pages she created to help children express their own feeling about their cancer diagnosis or their family member’s diagnosis. I personally learned some wonderful tools I can use with my own children and family members. I hope you will enjoy this interview as much as I did.

I am pleased to formally introduce you to Tiffany Berg Coughran, certified chaplain and professional consultant. Since 2012 Tiffany has spoken professionally and authored multiple books on emotional wellness. After losing her husband to cancer in 2009 she returned to school and certified as a corporate and hospice chaplain. Tiffany has worked with families and individuals in the intense – intensities in the ER, ICU, hospice care, suicide support and complicated end of life decisions. With this expertise and personal experience with loss, she is a frequent presenter at hospitals, social work conferences, grief support groups, and cancer awareness events for adults and children. In addition to her chaplaincy Tiffany has



worked for many years with charities and local and national media. Her charity efforts have raised over 3.5 million dollars for needy Utah families.

Laura Lane: Thank you so much Tiffany for joining us today. I greatly appreciate it. My first question to you is, I would love to know what lead you on to the path of becoming a chaplain?

Tiffany Berg Coughran: You know, first of all, it's challenging to even understand what a chaplain does because that role has changed so much over the years. Chaplains we usually think of maybe a certain denomination or perhaps in the military because there's military chaplains. So, as a chaplain myself, I have been educated. It's a year and a half full time, so thirty-five hours a week of intense training on how to work with people through difficult emotional crises. Because when we go through things that that test our mortality, our faith, our relationships, our strength of character and will, those things take that spiritual, have that spiritual impact and so a chaplain is a little bit different than a counselor. A chaplain actually addresses those things, more on a spiritual level so that decisions can be made. And our goal is to help people feel validated and valued with what they're going through, without supplying them answers, but actually supplying them with questions that may help them look deeper and find their own answers. It is that emotional support with that spiritual emphasis.

Laura Lane: Okay, well that's a great explanation of chaplaincy. So, what brought you along that path to become a chaplain yourself then?

Tiffany Berg Coughran: So, prior to becoming a chaplain I had worked for ten years in addiction recovery, working with moms coming out of addiction. That's kind of my heart, that's kind of my family story. And as I had been working in that arena for about ten years, my late husband was diagnosed with cancer. Then we went through a couple of years of treatment. We thought everything was gone and it came back, and it came back as stage 4. So, he had another year and a half of treatment, really treatment just to give him more time. And at that time, we had five children together and after he passed, I felt so lost. And of course, all of those questions about my purpose and how do I be a... how do I be a mom in this experience? And how do I have faith? And how do I... all of those questions you know, came up for me and I found chaplaincy. And during that year and a half, which lead to more years of working in hospitals and working in high crisis and I just developed a deep sense of love for other people that have gone through those things too. So, that chaplaincy, showed me patterns in myself and in other people that kind of overlaid the history I had in addiction recovery. So, it become really this goal to help people through whatever is hurting them emotionally.

Laura Lane: Oh wow. Well thank you for doing that, that's just so brave for you to take your own heartache and struggles and turn that around so you can support other people.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Well, thank you. It's messy! I think emotions, emotions and grieve and certainly cancer, you know, I just have swear words that come to my mind when I think



about it. So, getting more information about that, how to how to live balanced, even when those things are happening, has been so profound for me and my kids and it's been a blessing to help other people.

Laura Lane: That's wonderful. I was reading in I guess a bio, one of your bio's that says that you combine clinical tools of chaplaincy with a neurolinguistics practice of ideal life vision. I would love to know more about that. What is that? What it is that you do?

Tiffany Berg Coughran: So, we've had this this method of addressing emotional pain through counseling. And that's one avenue, but I don't know that it's necessarily fast, or it challenges us sometimes because we can be going to a therapist for years and just venting what we've gone through as opposed to really transcending that changing. So, the tools that I use and that have been combined to create what I do. I teach five systems that are based on forgiveness therapy which is really the practice of becoming whole by forgiving ourselves and other people. NLP which I, neurolinguistics programming, so understanding how the brain sees things and understanding that the use of icons and pathways and frameworks helps the brain to remember things. And then ideal life vision is actually setting your goals and your intension. Writing it on paper for the different areas of your life, where you want to be well and what that would look like, and then recording that so that you can keep repeating that, listen to it in the morning listen to it at night, and your brain actually starts to seamlessly and almost effortlessly take those new pathways.

Laura Lane: Oh wow.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: So as opposed to traditional counseling what we're finding is that when people are able to use their brain with them, not against them, then then they have so much more success and they're able to, with systems, they're able to change faster and on a deeper level.

Laura Lane: Oh that's I can I can see that the benefit of that I can think of my own life how that would help, I could think of some others, a young woman that I know who has cancer at the moment that that would be a huge benefit. Tell us also about your make peace systems that you have.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: So, the make peace systems I have created with all of those components in place. If I could use, kind of like five different instruments, those different disciplines, I combine those to create five systems. The first is critical listening skills, the second is a system, I call it the restore model. It helps us... we take these sequential steps; we feel restored and resilient. The other, the third, is actually how we can categorize pain so that we can access the healing faster. The fourth is how, it's called the calm model, how we enter into a conversation or an experience and bring calm. It could be parenting. It could be as an employee or as a boss. How do we bring that calm when we're supporting someone else, and then the fifth is healthy boundaries. So, each one of those five systems is learnable and kind of like learning a dance you know, the 1,2,3 1,2,3. When we learn those sequences things become so much easier and we know the next step. You know when people are



struggling with grief, they feel a little lost. What do I do next? What do I do with all of this pain? And so, the systems actually teach you what do you do next, so that you have balance, healthy relationships. You're seeing what you need to see at the time you need to see it.

Laura Lane: Yeah and are those skills that are both... that you teach them to parents and to children or tell me about...

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yes, in fact we, I released these five systems through courses last year. So, it's been about a year we've been teaching this. And actually, these five systems have now been adopted in corporations, hospitals, hospices, bereavement programs, even relationship programs. And that surprised me, that they would have that much impact. And the great thing is they're learnable for adults or children. And again, once you have that 1,2,3 1,2,3 down, then all of a sudden, your relationships are easier, your physical health is better. I've had clients that have been able to change their eating and sleeping and stress patterns, which is huge when we're under so much stress. It's saved marriage. It's grown businesses. And so, I'm surprised and thrilled that people are having so much success with it, but the fact that when someone is having a panic attack that these same systems can help them actually protect themselves.

Laura Lane: Wow

Tiffany Berg Coughran: That's powerful. So, I'm thrilled at that.

Laura Lane: I'm sure we could probably spend an hour, just learning from you about that. I would love to learn more. But I'd love to know what are the resources that you have for parents? I understand you wrote a book about cancer for kids.

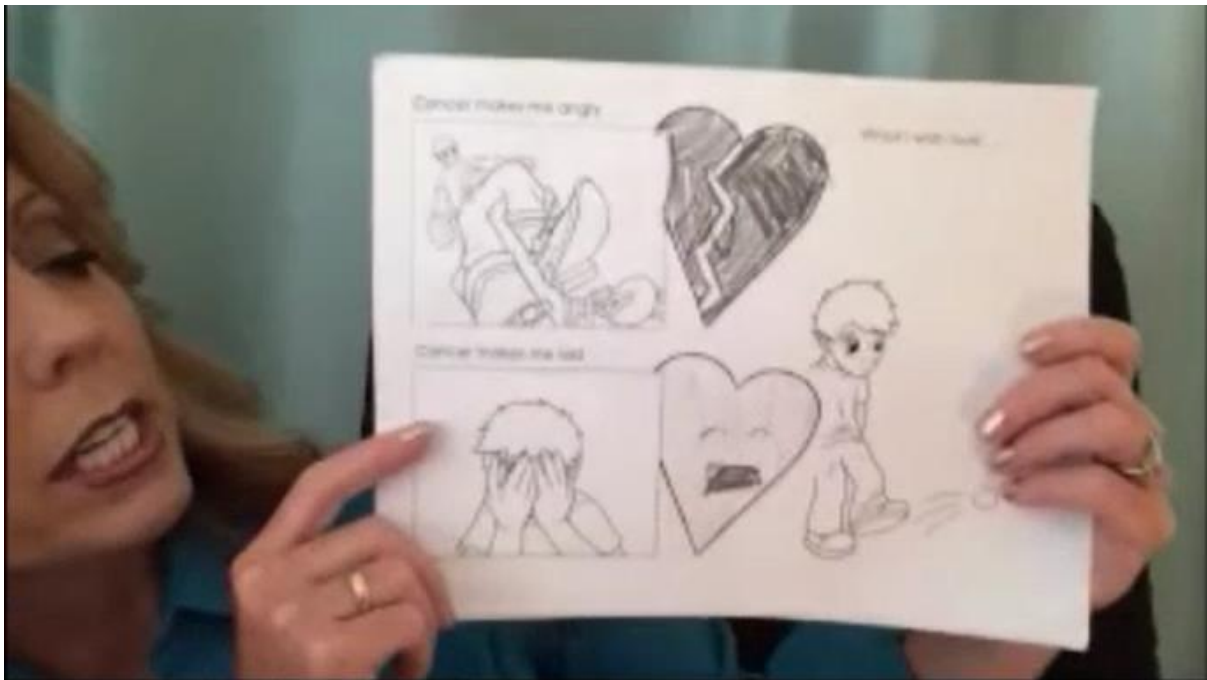
Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yes, in fact let me grab that, it fell onto floor here. So, this is a book that I wrote. Actually, it's called "If Cancer Was A Fish, I'd Throw it Back" and gosh wouldn't we all, right? So, this was actually something that that I wrote for my children and my nieces and nephews when my late husband was going through cancer. Just kind of talking about the different emotions that cancer brings up. Which again sometimes swear words are the only way to explain that. But there's anger, and sadness, and despair, and frustration. And so, each of the images here kind of talks about different emotions that a child can be feeling. And it's been one way to open that conversation with kids and adults with some levity. Where we can talk about gosh what, wouldn't we change it if we could? And then with the same illustrator, we were able to make coloring books and coloring pages. So, after reading the book the child the children could actually do some coloring and talk about their own feelings. Which, boy, talking about our feelings is so healing in and of itself. You know, I think each one of us has had those conversations where we felt heard, and even just feeling heard we felt better. And so, coloring can do that for kids too.

Laura Lane: Yeah. Do you have any examples?

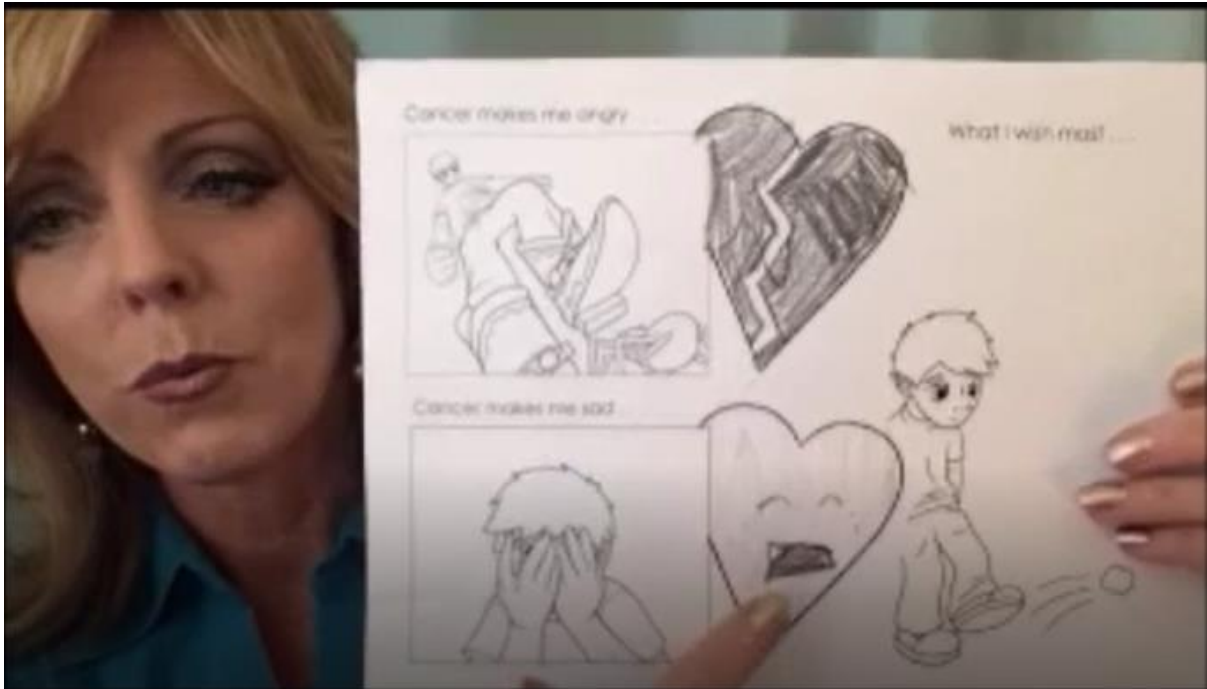
Tiffany Berg Coughran: I do so, so this is a, let me just back up. As we color with children it's kind of a way to get into their thought processes without judgement. You know if they're

coloring and they're coloring a lot of black then we say, "Oh, you must be feeling very upset or angry about that." They may recoil and not share as much. But if we say "Wow, that's a lot of purple. Tell me about that?" or "Wow, that's a lot of black. Tell me about that?" There's no judgement and a child can talk more freely to that emotion. And so, the goal in working with kids on their coloring and I believe I have a download for everyone that's watching... they can actually download this coloring sheet. [LINK]

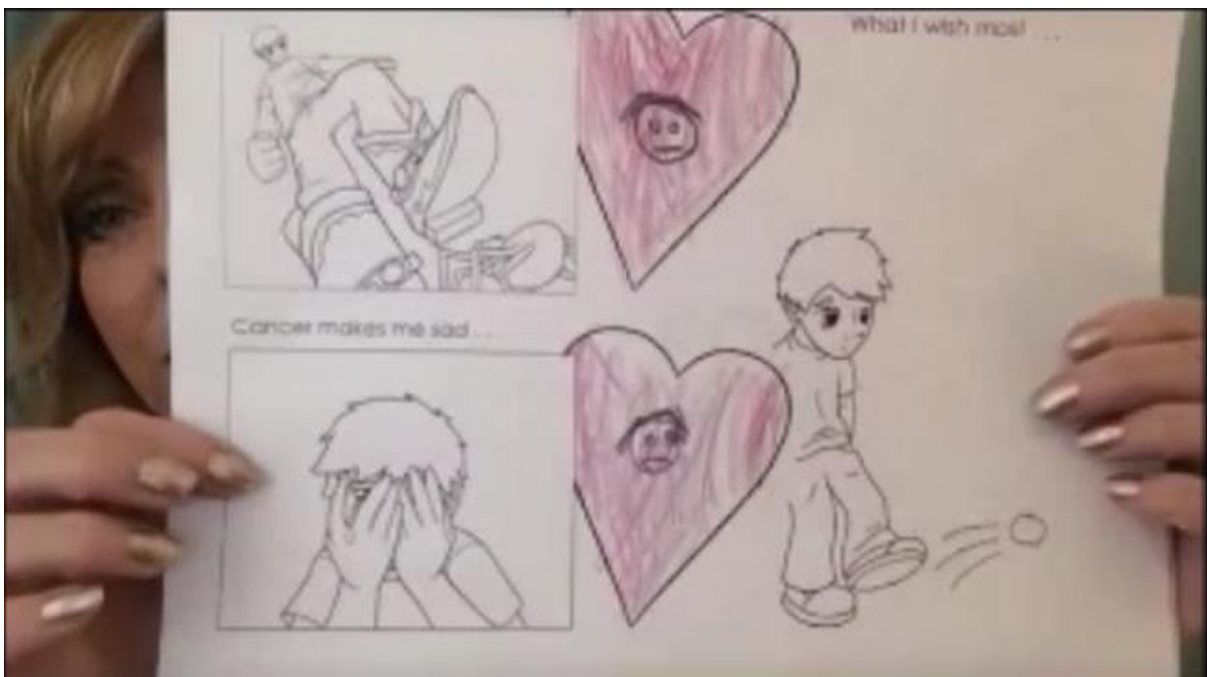
[Image 1]



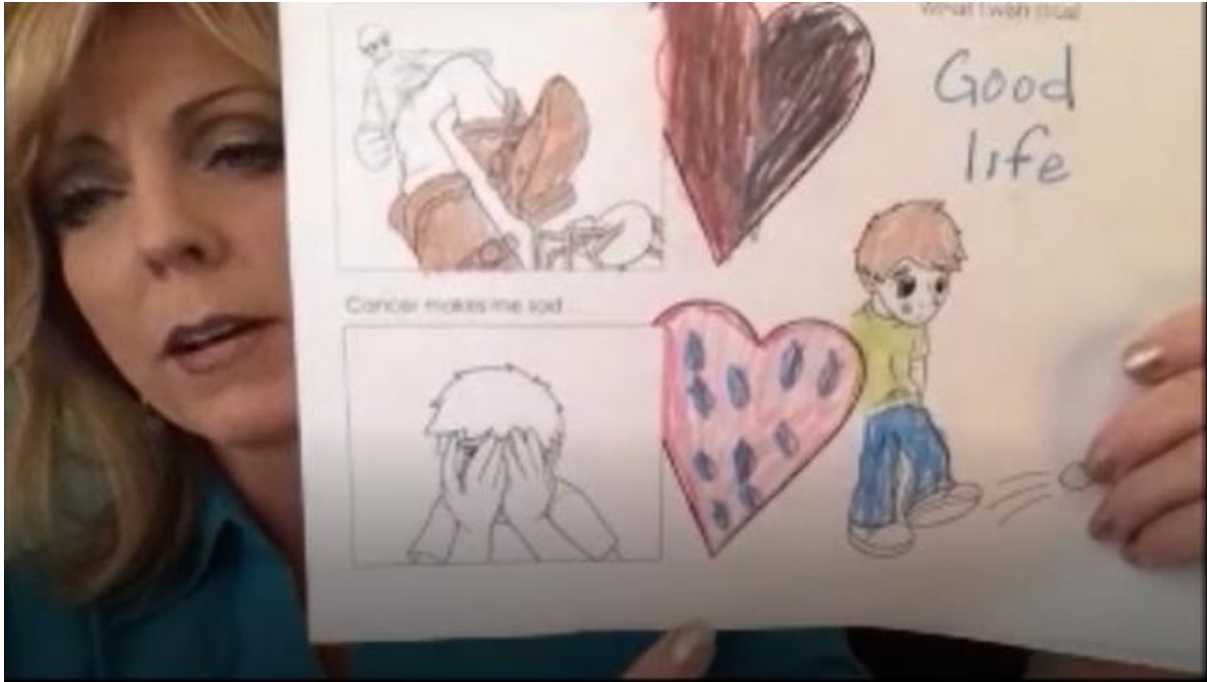
So, this coloring sheet, actually this heart represents their mad feelings. So, we have them color their mad feelings first, and then their sad feelings, and then what they wish most. These are parts of the conversation that allow a child to open up and it's kind of sequential. Mad is easier to access than sad. And as they're coloring they kind of open up more and more. So, one of the things I've noticed that you can see here,



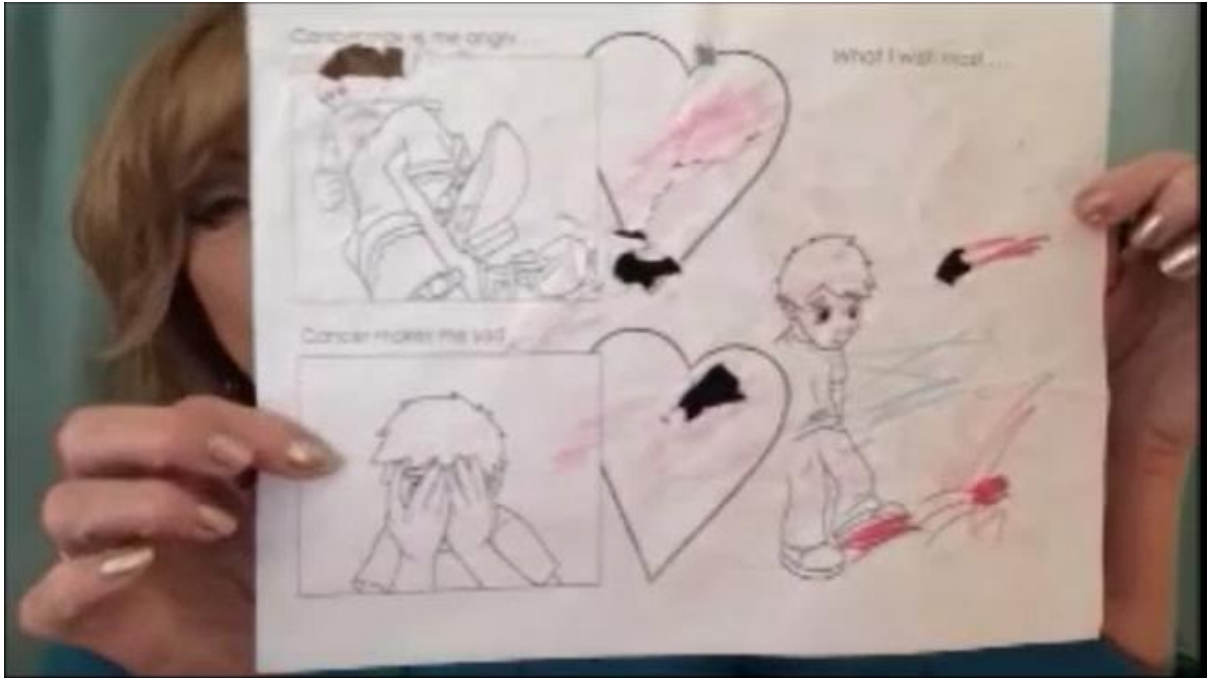
[Image 2] is that children, often when we talk about emotions... what are your mad feelings? What are your sad feelings? What do they look like? We often find kids will draw faces because they're very keyed in. Which is something that we parents want to know, that kids are very keyed in when we are angry or we're sad, or even when we are expressionless because we are in shock, kids see that. And that is really profound to them, they remember that. And again, you can see that here just some little faces.



I'll share some things that I have found are interesting.



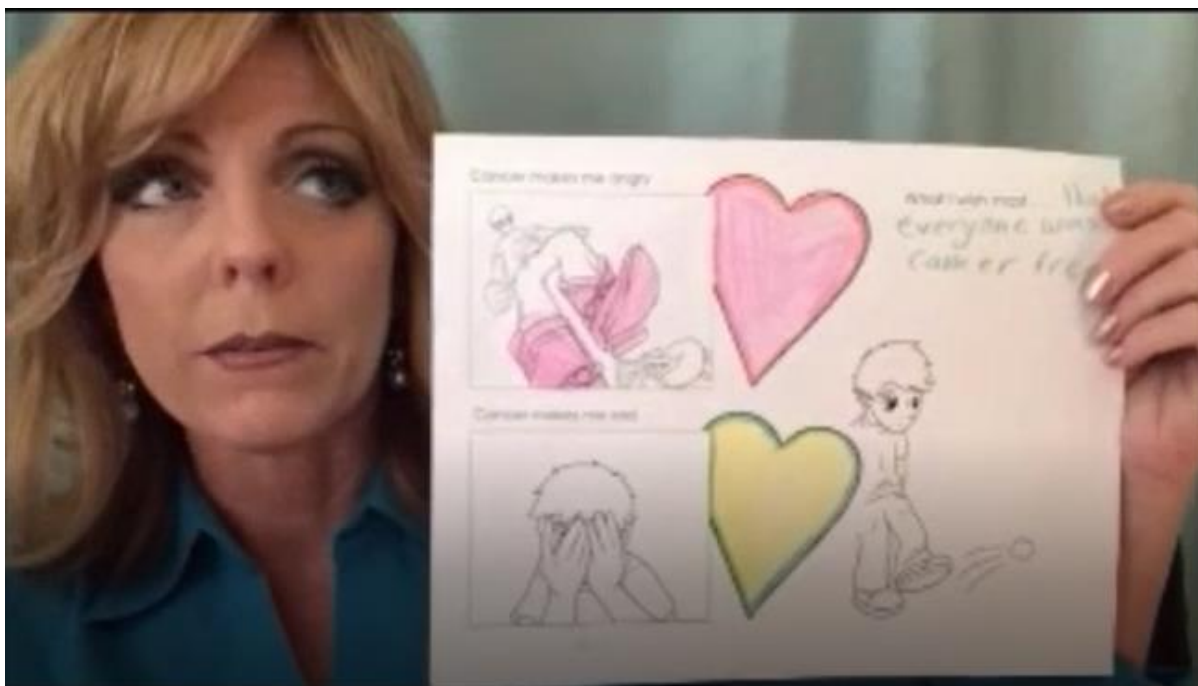
This is another mad one. You can see the brown. And you can see here the sad. There's lots of tears there, but here he's also colored tears. Here you can see there's also tears and here there's also tears. So, as a parent looking at this I would say "Wow, I'm noticing that there's tears here, there's tears here, and here, that's a lot of tears." And just let it be awkward. When we do that, we allow a child the space to maybe talk about those tears. I did this exercise with a family that had a teenage boy, and we were all doing the same coloring and he was a good sport, and he did it too. And his heart was very much like this, with lots of tears. And the mom was surprised, and she said, "You know, I haven't seen you cry at all since your dad died." And it had been two weeks. And he said, "that's because I keep my tears to myself, I don't want to cry in front of you because it makes you more sad." So, this was a way for that mom to really see, oh my goodness, it's not because he's not sad, it's because he can't. He doesn't feel like he can share that with me. And so, the coloring can often times open up emotional things that maybe we wouldn't see.



This is another one you can see the holes in it ... on the back side. You know sometimes, a lot of emotion, a lot of strong emotion will come out and you know the hitting of the paper and that's okay, if you can let that be safe, that you know we, we're just going to color out our feelings and that's okay. Then this can be a better option than like hitting their sister.

Laura Lane: Yeah that that's okay and hitting your pillow's okay.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yes, yes, some interesting things again this can be kind of a road map to parents as they're just coloring with their child. These shoulder-to-shoulder experiences where we're not face to face with the child but maybe we're next to them and we're coloring too. What that does is it almost takes the guard down; it unmask things we don't have to be so scripted if we're just shoulder to shoulder. Whether that's a walk, or coloring, or something, cooking, those can be the best times to talk to our kids.



This was another thing that was interesting to me, if you notice when we were going through these coloring opportunities, there were between 80 and 100 people in the room. Each family had someone in their family that was terminal, and so lots of different ages, between the ages of 4 and 84. So grandparents were there, so the children came up afterwards and shared their coloring with me. And this was great information because I asked them to color out their mad feelings and color out their sad feelings. What do you notice about these? I'm asking for mad and sad.

Laura Lane: Well, one's bright and..

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Does it look like heavy emotion? Or does it look happy?

Laura Lane: It looks happy.

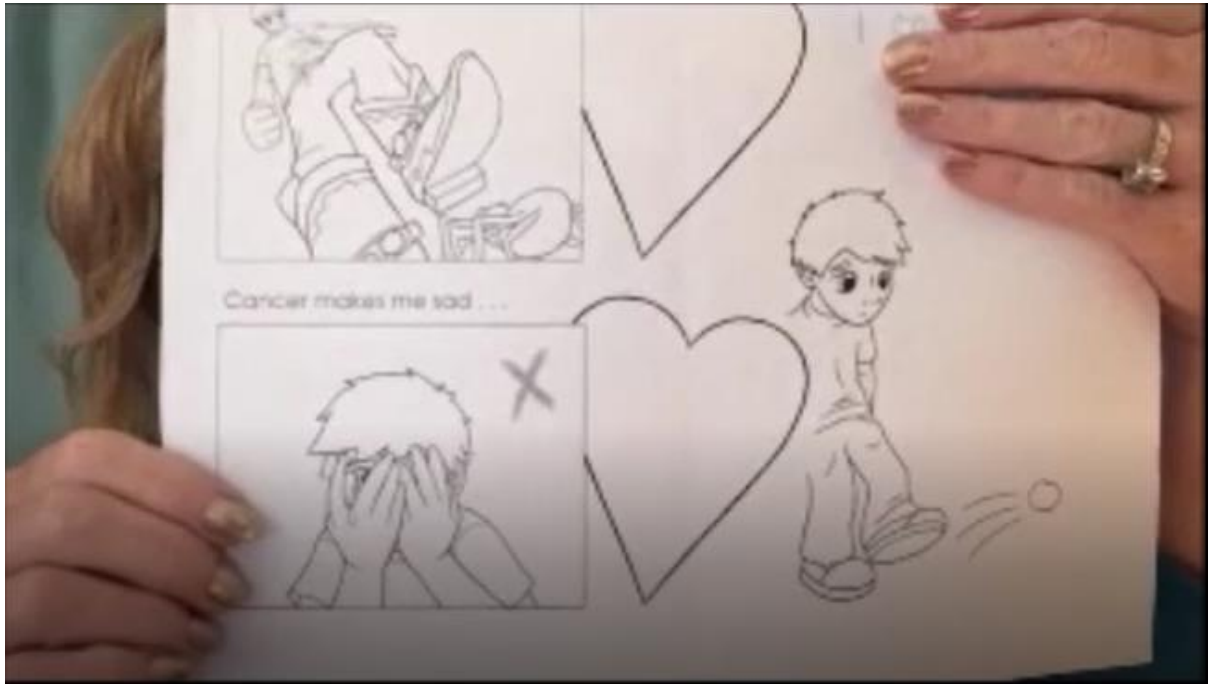
Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yeah so one of the things that we want to recognize... we do this as adults all the time too, we don't always share how we're really feeling, and we do that for a lot of reasons. This little girl when it, in this section it says, "what I wish most" it said, "that everyone was cancer free." So, she is very positive and you can see she's very perfectionistic here, where everything is just perfect and everything is happy. And we do that as moms and dads, we kind of go into denial and act like everything is okay. So, I call that emotional dyslexia. Where we're not... it's coming out backwards because there's... we can't come out straight up.

Laura Lane: Right.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: And so, when I talked to the mom and we were looking at this with the little girl I said "how, what is she like? How is she?" And the mom just kind of winked and smiled and she said, "she's the perfect child." So, what that told me was, this was not

the child that was sick in the family, this was a child that has chosen to be the pleaser, the glue, the happy child. And it's understandable but there's also some negatives when a child does that. And so, this mom could actually at this age start having conversations, allowing permission, to this child to have maybe angry feelings, or jealous feelings, or scared feelings, but it doesn't always have to be happy. Does that make sense?

Laura Lane: Yeah.



Tiffany Berg Coughran: Now this was interesting, so I'm going to cover this part up but I want you to see, if I said, "let's have you color the mad and sad." What do you see?

Laura Lane: Well, they obviously haven't colored anything, and they've just put an X

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yeah, so no coloring and just the X.

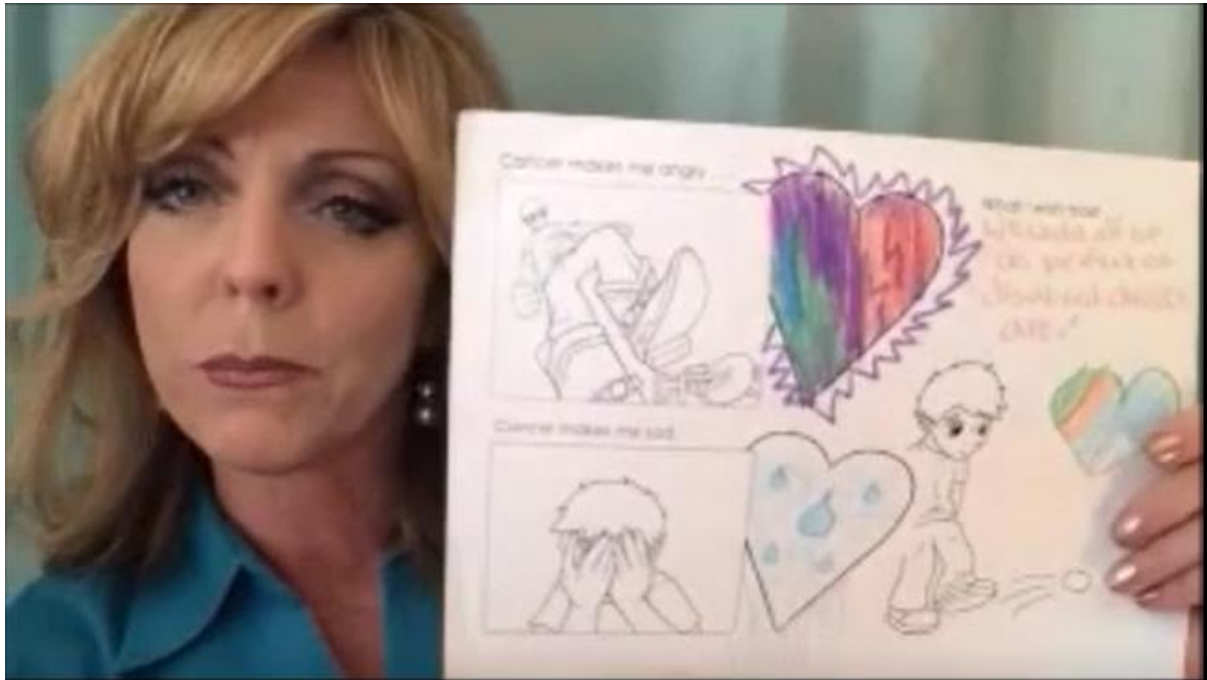
Laura Lane: They don't want to express.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Yeah, so now when I tell you what he wrote, what I wish most, it will make a lot of sense, and as a parent huge clues on how to love up on this child okay. So, what I wish most is that I could be thought about.

Laura Lane: Ooh, feeling forgotten.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: I can't show up. I'm not important. In fact, often when I see children making the X's... just with the neural linguistic programming I often lean towards shame, that there's a sense of shame or I am the problem, or I am marked. is there something wrong with me? And so, this is definitely some information at least to start. "Wow, so you want to feel thought about, you want to be thought about, what would that look like? If people were thinking about you?" And so, this is just a great way to see information we

normally wouldn't see just in regular conversation. And it's so cheap and easy that we may underscore the value. And truly as a parent if you were to see this in your child's thinking at six or seven or eight years old, how powerful that piece of information could be as opposed to when they're eighteen, nineteen, huge.



So last one, this was interesting in this in the area that says what I wish most, it says, "what I wish most is that we could all be as perfect as disabled children are."

Laura Lane: Oh, wow.

Tiffany Berg Coughran: So, this kind of clues us in to maybe some beliefs about, you know, a special needs child or sibling and not being as perfect as that as that sibling. So again, I use that coloring not only with cancer issues but also with divorce. What I wish most, what I'm mad about, what I'm sad about, it can be a great way to start a conversation no matter what the age. It worked with young teenage girls in foster care. That the coloring opened up a lot of things, even sexual abuse traumas that had happened to them. And so, really the goal is opening those conversations in a different way because we can't always say, "Hey Johnny, how are you feeling about the cancer? How are you feeling about you know, this loss?" It's just... it's hard for them to articulate and so coloring can be a great launch pad into new organic conversations and as long as we're open. And we don't have any judgement about what where that conversation goes. A lot of great things can happen there. And again, we don't have to have all the answers because just feeling listened to is powerful. And children, you know, we're not very present as adults. We're on our phone. We've got things to do, places to be. And even with a child, just being present and sharing that moment with them without any distractions, can make them feel so important, and their feelings are important.



Laura Lane: Those are so many wonderful tips and reminders and things that I want to apply with my own children and thank you so much I really appreciate that. So, I would love to finish up. If you have any other suggestions... we'll leave you with that last question. Do you have any other suggestions for parents whose children have been diagnosed with cancer, either to help the parents themselves, to help their child, who's by been diagnosed or the rest of their family? What would be the advice that you would give?

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Just those open questions. I again if we ask straight forward questions like, how are you feeling? How is this making you feel? Even as young children they know what the proper answer and what you shouldn't say. We shouldn't hate. We know, so, it's already somewhat scripted and so if you can kind of ask questions maybe in a unique way like, "Wow how is your tummy feeling about this?" You know that's kind of may seem odd but often a child can already sense the turning in their belly that they feel anxious and they don't have the words to always say what that is. And so, how's your heart feeling about this? Giving them maybe some other clues or angles to answer to that question and also recognize kids that think they don't have words they really don't have the vocabulary now. What's the nuance between feeling angry and feeling jealous? There's a nuance but even as adults we don't know always know what that is. So, if you can say, "so tell me what this is like? is it like a friend that moved away? Is it like when you lost your puppy? Is it like a bully?" So, kids can often find something to compare it to, but they may not know how to express how they feel. So, getting them to talk about.. "you know what is it like? Is it like something you've gone through before or is it unlike anything you've ever...?" "it's like this. it's like my friend Johnny moving away but like times a thousand." Then you can say "Wow, I get it, that's big. That's probably bigger than anything you've gone through." So, then we can take a different approach and let them in their beautiful child, you know, expression, share with us what that pain is like.

Laura Lane: Right, those are great suggestions, thank you so much Tiffany. So where can we direct our audience? What website can we send our audience to so they can learn more about you about your work and your book?

Tiffany Berg Coughran: Awesome, they can either go to tiffanycoughran.com or they can go to makepeacesystems.com and so either one of those should get them to the free download for kids and the different books and trainings.

Laura Lane: Great, well we'll do that we'll make sure we include that link with this interview so again, thank you so much I really appreciate this it's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Thank you for joining me for today's show. If you would like to see the images of the colouring pages Tiffany references in the interview, as well as the links to her websites to download the resources, they can be found on my blog post about this episode at www.twomothersoneprayer.com/blog.

Please join me again next week for my interview with world renown Naturopathic Integrative Oncologist Dr. Adam McLeod as we discuss how he helps his patients to reduce



the normal side-effects of conventional treatments using an integrative naturopathic approach.

Before we end our show today, we have one last segment. Over the last few years, I have asked other cancer moms what advice they wish they had known when their child was first diagnosed. I have compiled that information and will be sharing their advice each week. You can download the top 101 pieces of advice that I put together as a mini E-book at www.twomothersoneprayer.com/advice.

Today's advice comes from Narece and Anne. Their advice had to do with taking medication. Narece said, "If your kid can swallow an M&M, he can swallow pills instead of nasty liquids! Most meds come in pill form! But having said that, Nasty tasty liquid meds go down easier when you have a 15ml med cup with root beer in it and the dose of meds- shoot it back and chase with a clean root beer! Nurses trick that worked till we found pills! Anne added the advice "we used to crush pills and add them to apple sauce, which worked fairly well."

Thank you, Narece and Anne, for sharing that.

If you have advice you have learned along the way that you wish someone had told you weeks, months or years earlier, I invite you to fill out the contact form on our website www.twomothersoneprayer.com/contact and I will be sharing your advice with our listeners on future shows.

[Music in background]

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule today to listen to the Hope Strength Courage Podcast. I look forward to sharing more experts and advice with you again next Wednesday. Please remember to take a minute to subscribe to the show. Thanks also need to go out to our Hope Strength Courage Production Team which consists of Kyle Outridge Productions and music by Fiz Anthony. To learn more about myself, Laura Lane and to order my book please visit www.twomothersoneprayer.com

[Music ends]