

EXAMPLE OF A THERAPEUTIC LETTER SENT TO A FAMILY EXPERIENCING CANCER. THE NAMES OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN CHANGED.

Dear xxx Family:

Greetings from Canada! My colleague Dr. Janice Bell and I would like to express our deep gratitude to your family for making time to meet with us in xxx. The nurses who participated in our workshop were very keen to learn how to have more healing conversations with families that would soften suffering despite experiencing serious illness. Therefore we are very grateful for the tremendous learning opportunity you offered to us all at our Family Nursing Externship workshop.

We want to follow-up and share some of our thoughts and impressions in a letter. First, we were very moved by your descriptions of the many ways that serious illness has created challenges and worries for your family over the past year. Cancer has indeed been an uninvited guest in your family that has robbed Lene of personal and family time due to many appointments and treatments plus the loss of meaningful work that you so enjoyed. Cancer has also put deep fear and worry in the hearts of everyone in the family.

Lene and Jørgen, we witnessed the deep commitment and strong marital connection and love between the two of you. We were touched by the ways you have lovingly supported each other and your children during this difficult past year of cancer invading your lives. In particular, we learned that you, Jørgen, have made special efforts to spend more time with your wife, even driving long distances from your work in order to be with her each night and attend treatments.

Lene, you believe that the family members who are suffering the most about this illness diagnosis are your parents and your husband. We believe you are very astute in your observations. In addition, we believe you are also very sensitive to your youngest son Pelle's response to your illness and providing opportunities to share information and address any of his concerns. Lene and Jørgen, your two adult children (and your 15 year old son Pelle whom we did not meet) are a credit to your parenting.

Ditte, we heard you describe your sadness and fear that your mother's life might be shortened because of the illness with cancer. We were impressed by the bravery you showed us in our meeting through your tears and your willingness to speak about your fears. It takes much courage to speak about what might happen to your family if your mother should die prematurely. But we believe that these kind of tears and words are healing even in the midst of great worry. We were also impressed by your incredible generosity that you have shown your family members by inviting them on special trips paid by you.

Joachim, we heard the ways that you are being more present for your family since the diagnosis of cancer entered your family and we admire the maturity and wisdom that

Janice 10/21/13 5:07 PM

Comment: In the introduction, we provide information about the context for this therapeutic letter and the reason(s) that the clinician has decided to write a therapeutic letter.

Janice 10/21/13 4:56 PM

Comment: This section of the therapeutic letter attempts to acknowledge the individual's and/or family's illness suffering—hearing the “cries of the wounded”. The importance of this was underscored in the research of Moules about the effect on families of receiving a therapeutic letter. For more information, see *Beliefs & Illness: A Model for Healing* pp. 258-263.

Janice 10/21/13 5:07 PM

Comment: Commendations are offered to the father and mother and their marital bond. Notice how we used the evidence we learned in the therapeutic conversation to make the commendations authentic and connected to the family's illness narrative. For more information, see *Beliefs & Illness: A Model for Healing* pp. 263-267.

Janice 10/21/13 4:56 PM

Comment: We acknowledge illness suffering again here by documenting the family's response to the interventive question: “Who in your family is suffering the most?” Commendations are specifically offered to the mother. By highlighting her astute observations and sensitivity to her youngest son, we hope that she will continue her openness to share information and address illness concerns with all of her children, including speaking the unspeakable.

Janice 10/21/13 4:44 PM

Comment: Commendations offered to the daughter who was most able to “speak the unspeakable” during the therapeutic conversation. Notice the clinician shares a belief that that talking can be healing.

your mother's illness seems to have invited in you. You described your health as being "spectacular" but we believe you are also a spectacular son and brother.

In our clinical work with families, we have come to appreciate that living with a serious illness when a mother has an uncertain future is especially challenging for families because the mother is often the emotional center and heart of a family. Families have taught us it is useful to find a balance between making time to talk openly with each other about illness worries and concerns; allow tears; speak the unspeakable; obtain comfort hugs, and at the same time to also find ways to create space and time in family life that is "illness free".

In this way, your family can perhaps "stand up" to the uninvited guest of cancer and thereby perhaps decrease its influence on the family. We believe you are learning to do this very well.

Three questions that may be helpful to your family to find this balance are:

1. How much influence/control should we allow a serious illness like cancer to have in our daily lives and;
2. How much influence/control can we exert as individual family members or as a family as a whole to put cancer talk and worry in its place?
3. How and when can we show our vulnerability and suffering that will enable each family member to be true to themselves and to each other?

We were struck by your family's resourcefulness and determination to live as fully as possible in the midst of this serious illness by deliberately spending more time together as a family, celebrating a significant 25th wedding anniversary, and becoming involved in a family building project of a "saloon" in your garden. We learned that your family has a sense of humor that likely also helps put cancer in its place. We wonder what other ways your family will experiment with to keep this serious illness in its place and not overtake your home and family life.

We greatly appreciated the opportunity to learn from your family at our workshop and we hope that you may have further opportunities for another conversation about how your family is living with illness.

With warm regards,

Dr. Lorraine M. Wright RN, PhD
Dr. Janice M Bell, RN, PhD
And other members of the clinical team.

Janice 10/21/13 4:49 PM

Comment: Commendations offered to the son. Drawing forth the family member's strengths and resources may invite family members to feel heard and understood. Commendations also have the possibility of helping family members open space to new ideas that are offered to them by the clinician/reflecting team/therapeutic letter. Notice that particular words, phrases, and ideas are deliberately highlighted, i.e., "spectacular".

Janice 10/21/13 4:59 PM

Comment: We draw on clinical experience and research literature that suggests that mothers have a significant emotion-regulating role in the family which also is a form of acknowledging the deep suffering experienced by this family. We highlight a particular therapeutic move in this therapeutic letter of offering externalizing conversations. Throughout this letter we deliberately use "externalizing" language, i.e., illness as an uninvited guest and in this paragraph we make a specific suggestion about the usefulness of finding a balance which may help to challenge the belief of the mother who reported that she thinks about illness 90% of the time. For more information about Offering Externalizing Conversations, see *Beliefs and Illness: A model for healing*, pp. 256-258.

Janice 10/21/13 4:59 PM

Comment: Specific suggestions for externalizing illness and challenging beliefs about mastery, control and influence are offered here. Notice the use of interventive questions that the family might ask themselves as they try to find a "balance". Notice also the commendation, "We believe you are learning to do this very well" which offers hope that they will continue this work of gaining more mastery over the "uninvited guest" in even more thoughtful and deliberate ways--af... [1]

Janice 10/21/13 4:53 PM

Comment: We provide "evidence" from the therapeutic conversation that the family is already attempting "to live as fully as possible in the midst of serious illness". An interventive question is deliberately asked by the clinician near the end of the letter to extend the therapeutic conversation, i.e., "we wonder what other ways your family will exper... [2]

Janice 10/21/13 5:01 PM

Comment: We close the letter by thanking the family and reviewing plans for future therapeutic conversations.

Janice 10/21/13 5:03 PM

Comment: The therapeutic letter is signed by the clinician and members of the clinical team are also recognized.