

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected by Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia.

alzheimer's association®

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## Live with Joy

By Dr. Rebecca Chopp, Chancellor Emerita at University of Denver

*This personal essay was originally posted on April 23, 2021, at [alz.org](http://alz.org)*

Medical prescriptions are usually so regimented. There's a drug, a dosage, frequency, duration. Pick it up at the pharmacy. Life returns to normal.

But my Alzheimer's prescription was different. Live with joy is how it started. I had just been given the diagnosis I had most feared all my adult life. I could withstand so many things as long as they could be fixed, but the dissolution of my brain—the inability to remember those I love, or not be able to read a book, or paint a picture, or button my shirt? Please, God, no.

But I had just been handed that unfixable, end-to-my-life-as-I-know-it sentence. And this loving neurologist, who I have come to trust and enjoy, began my prescription with those magic words: Live with joy.

I've come to see these words as an invitation more so than a mandate. An invitation to live now, to live and love as fully as I can, and to stay as healthy as possible by living as joyously as I can.

In what must be the world's greatest irony, what is good for my health put an end to my career as an academic and leader in higher education. I thought that brought me joy. But now, joy means avoiding stress, exploring life, being



healthy and, in this way, delaying (and fighting) the looming and ugly end. I'm still a warrior. But now joy is my shield and my weapon in this very different kind of war.

On the one hand, I am a classic “good girl.” I do my homework; I follow doctors' orders. On the other side of things, I am a rebel warrior who likes a good fight. So I took this prescription on as not only a mandate, but also a battle cry, and an invitation to fight the good fight.

I studied exercise. I studied diet. I took up painting (more about that in another blog). I did all the things I was told would be good for me to do. And I also did them with joy. A joy I never knew myself capable of feeling, a joy I clung to when I was scared, a joy I would not let anyone nibble at for their own selfish sake. I breathe joy in and out, even as I worry about those not as privileged as I am who suffer this disease, especially

Living with joy is about having a bit of fun here and there, but it requires so much more. It means abiding in the connections of this world. For me it means abiding in God in the mountains, in the rivers, in the sky. And in the people.

If you have Alzheimer's or if you care for someone who has the condition, I wholeheartedly recommend that prescription: live with joy. But, you may wonder, how is that possible?

Here are three ways I am learning to live with joy. Maybe they can help you too.

**I embrace who and what I love.** I love my quirky friends whose wild hearts I had little time for when I was working. I took up painting after my diagnosis after being told it would be good for me, and now, painting is like being in the heart of God. I love being a workout warrior with weights, Tai Chi, hiking, walking, Pilates and pushing myself to stay healthy. I have even learned to enjoy my new battle diet of legumes and SMASH (salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and herring).

**I strenuously avoid what makes me anxious or depressed.** For the first time in my life, I have a medical excuse to avoid the people, places and things that don't bring me joy—or are just plain boring. I am always polite (remember, I am a good girl), but now I have permission to say no to all sorts of things, due to my doctor's orders. Concentrating on goodness, truth and beauty means avoiding the rabbit holes of depression and anxiety. I always had the warrior's shield; now I have permission to use it.

We're walking this year, and we're inviting you to join us.

September 25th    October 2nd  
West Ventura      Santa Maria

October 23rd      October 30th  
East Ventura      San Luis Obispo

November 6th  
Santa Barbara



Start your team  
today at  
[alz.org/walk](http://alz.org/walk)

**I distinguish joy from fun.** Joy can be found in being present, really present, to a friend who is grieving or suffering. Or in helping raise funds for Alzheimer's research. Or being patient with a stranger who needs a listening ear. Joy is abiding in the real; and being grateful for all the forms of abiding. And sometimes finding joy isn't a whole lot of fun.

Of course, my way won't work for everyone. And I never want to suggest I don't understand the emotional devastation of this disease for those who have it and those who love its victims. But in the face of this disease, for fighting this particular war, my doctor's clear medical advice is wise, and I'm standing by it. Live with joy!

## Reach out for Help

Call our 24/7 HelpLine to speak with a live dementia specialist

800.272.3900

Join a free Support Group for caregivers or people living with dementia

[alz.org/CRF](http://alz.org/CRF)

Sign up for free classes to learn about the disease and how to care for a loved one

[training.alz.org](http://training.alz.org)