WHAT'S IMPORTANT NOW?

Faith Over Fear

A Step-by-Step System for Mastering the Mental Side of Cancer

Joe Pacheco

A Note Before We Begin

This isn't my story.

It is a step-by-step mental system born from my experience, from years of teaching mental performance, and from having to use those same principles myself when cancer entered my life.

Most of us already live by systems, even if we never call them that. You wake up on time. Make coffee. Shower. Eat. Go to work. Take care of your family. Handle what needs to be handled. Go to bed. Then you get up and do it again.

The routine is so familiar that you rarely think about the system underneath it. It is simply how you move through the day.

Then something goes wrong. You wake up late. The car will not start. A child gets sick. Work changes the schedule. Most of the time, you do not throw away the whole day because one part went wrong. You adjust. You decide what matters now. You get steady enough to do the next thing.

That ability to reset is something you already know how to do. Cancer is not an ordinary disruption, but the need for a way back is familiar. Cancer can change your schedule, your body, your finances, your relationships, and the way you think about the future. It can make a familiar life feel unfamiliar almost overnight.

That is when a deliberate mental system matters most.

Mastering the mental side of cancer does not mean eliminating fear, sadness, anger, or uncertainty. It means having a familiar way to respond when those things arrive. You do not need a perfect attitude. You need something you can return to when your thoughts race, the plan changes, the phone rings, a scan is coming, or everything feels like too much.

This guide is meant to give you that way back—a plan you can understand, practice, and execute.

THE CORE SYSTEM

RECOGNIZE - What is actually happening? What is real?

RELEASE - What is over or outside my control?

REFOCUS - Come back to the present. Be where your feet are.

W.I.N. - What's Important Now?

RESPONSE - What am I going to do about it?

That is the system: Recognize. Release. Refocus. W.I.N. Respond.

The process is repeatedly putting the system into action: use the system, act on your response, and repeat as life moves.

Not everything that supports the system is a step in the system. Perspective is a tool you can use when you need to widen the lens—especially when one difficult part of life begins to feel like the whole picture. Another tool is the simple cue, “So what. Next _____.” When you get knocked off course, it can remind you to reset and run the system again.

You will not move through the system perfectly or at the same speed every time. The goal is not perfection. The goal is to have something familiar to return to when pressure makes thinking difficult.

And when you reach the boundary of what you can control, faith carries what does not belong to you.

1. Recognize What Is Happening

There may be no perfect way to receive a cancer diagnosis.

Some people cry immediately. Some become angry. Some sit silently. Some start asking questions. Others hear very little after the doctor says the word cancer.

You may feel frightened, numb, confused, calm, overwhelmed, or all of those things within the same hour. There is no correct emotional response.

The first step in the system is simply to recognize what has happened.

Recognition does not mean you understand everything. It does not mean you approve of it, accept every consequence, or know what comes next. It means you are willing to face the truth that is in front of you.

This is happening.

That sentence may be painful, but it gives you a place to begin.

Fear often grows in the space between what we know and what we imagine. A diagnosis can cause your mind to race far beyond the information you have actually received. You may begin imagining the worst possible outcome before you know the type of cancer, the stage, the treatment options, or what your doctors recommend.

Cancer rarely gives you every answer at once. Information often arrives one piece at a time through tests, scans, pathology reports, consultations, and treatment plans.

That is why recognition must be based on facts, not fear.

ASK YOURSELF

What do I know right now?

What do I not know yet?

What am I feeling?

Am I reacting to a fact—or to something I am imagining?

You may know only that a test found something unusual. You may know the type of cancer but not the stage. You may know surgery has been recommended but not what recovery will look like. That may be all you know today.

Recognize the facts you have. Write down the questions you still need answered. Allow the medical process to provide information before your imagination supplies its own conclusions.

Reality may be difficult, but it is where your next step can be found.

2. Release What You Cannot Control

After recognizing what is happening, the next step is to release what you cannot control.

Release does not mean giving up. It does not mean pretending you are not afraid. It does not mean the diagnosis no longer matters.

Release means refusing to spend all of today's energy trying to control something that is not yours to control.

You cannot change a test result by worrying about it. You cannot force a pathology report to arrive sooner. You cannot guarantee how your body will respond to treatment. You cannot know today exactly what your life will look like months or years from now.

Your mind may still try. It may replay the appointment, question decisions you made years ago, ask 'Why me?' or build an entire future around an outcome that has not been determined.

Those thoughts are understandable. But they can consume the attention and energy you need for what is actually in front of you.

I do not have that answer today. That is not mine to control. I will deal with it when it becomes real.

You may have to tell yourself that more than once.

Release is not a one-time decision. Fear may return tomorrow morning, in the middle of an ordinary afternoon, or at two o'clock in the morning when everyone else is asleep.

When it does, recognize it again. Release it again. Return to the system again.

You are not failing because the fear returned. You are practicing how to respond when it does.

3. Refocus: Be Where Your Feet Are

Once you recognize what is happening and release what you cannot control, refocus. Come back to the present moment. Be where your feet are.

Then ask one question:

What's Important Now?

W.I.N. does not mean you have to solve cancer. It means that once you are back in the present, you identify what deserves your attention now.

A cancer diagnosis can make it feel as though everything else in your life has stopped. But it has not.

Sometimes W.I.N. will involve cancer: schedule the test, call the doctor, take the medication, write down the question, or tell someone you trust what happened.

Other times W.I.N. may be completely ordinary: buy groceries, make dinner, go to work, be present for someone you love, or rest.

That is not denial. It is life.

Refocusing means giving your attention to what needs it now instead of trying to handle every concern at once.

Cancer may be part of your life now. It does not have to become every part of your life.

4. Response: Control What You Can Control

Cancer takes away a great deal of control. Your schedule may suddenly belong to appointments. Your body may not feel like your own. People may discuss tests, procedures, medications, and treatment plans using words you have never heard before.

It is natural to feel powerless.

But you are not powerless.

You may not control what happens, but you can control how you respond to what happens.

Your first thought may arrive without permission. Fear may show up before you can stop it. Anger may come quickly. The important question is not whether the first thought appeared. The question is what you do with it next.

Your emotions carry information, but they do not have to make every decision.

Fear can lead you to prepare or cause you to panic. Anger can help you speak up or push away the people trying to help. Sadness can remind you to reach out or convince you to isolate yourself.

Your response is where control becomes action.

Things you can control may include:

- The questions you ask and the information you write down.
- How you prepare for appointments and whether you take someone with you.
- Whether you follow your treatment and medication plan.
- How honestly you report symptoms and side effects.
- The food, fluids, movement, and rest you are able to manage.

- The people you trust and the information you consume.
- The boundaries you set and the help you are willing to accept.
- The way you speak to yourself and communicate with your family.
- The response you choose right now.

Your response does not have to be perfect. Some days your response may be to make a difficult phone call, ask another question, go to work, or keep a commitment. Other days it may be to take your medication, eat something, pray, rest, and make it through the next hour safely.

Do not judge today's response by yesterday's capacity. Some days the best response available to you will be smaller than it was yesterday. That is still a response.

Control what you can control. Choose your response. Then put the system into action.

5. Practice the System. Work the Process.

A system is most valuable when it becomes familiar enough to use under pressure.

Think again about an ordinary day. You do not need a written manual to make coffee, get dressed, find your keys, get to work, handle family responsibilities, and go to bed. You have repeated that routine so many times that it helps carry you through the day without much thought.

A mental system can work the same way—but only if you practice it until the sequence becomes familiar enough to find when pressure makes thinking difficult.

The system is the mental framework. The process is repeatedly putting that system into action.

THE CORE SYSTEM

RECOGNIZE - What is actually happening? What is real?

RELEASE - What is over or outside my control?

REFOCUS - Come back to the present. Be where your feet are.

W.I.N. - What's Important Now?

RESPONSE - What am I going to do about it?

That is the system.

Working the process means using the system, acting on your response, and repeating it as life moves.

A FAMILIAR EXAMPLE

Suppose you wake up an hour late. Recognize: I am late. Release: I cannot get that hour back. Refocus: come back to the present instead of replaying the mistake. W.I.N.: What's Important Now? Response: adjust the schedule, make the call if you need to, and get moving. You act on that response. Later, when life gives you the next situation, you run the system again. That repeated cycle is the process.

THE PROCESS

- Run the system.
- Choose your response.
- Act on it.
- When the next situation comes, run the system again.

One situation. One decision. One day at a time. That is working the process.

MASTERY

Mastering the mental side of cancer does not mean fear disappears or that you never get knocked off course. It means you know how to return to the system when you do.

Some days you may run the process once. Other days you may need it hour by hour or minute by minute. Each time you recognize, release, refocus, ask W.I.N., choose your response, act on it, and repeat the process, the system becomes more familiar.

When you can return to the system and work the process as often as needed, you are on your way to mastering the mental side of cancer—not by controlling every thought or every outcome, but by knowing what to do next.

PROCESS OVER OUTCOME

Process over outcome is a mindset. The outcome matters. Of course it matters. But you do not allow an outcome you cannot fully control to consume the attention you need for today.

CARE ABOUT THE OUTCOME. LIVE IN THE PROCESS.

Some days you will work the process well. Other days it will be messy. You may be tired, scared, angry, distracted, or overwhelmed. You still return to it.

You are not ignoring the outcome. You are refusing to live in it before it arrives. Work today's process. Tomorrow, work tomorrow's.

STACK THE DAYS

Today + today + today becomes your journey. One day becomes two. Two becomes three. You climb the staircase the same way: one step at a time.

W.I.N. (What's Important Now?) is the step under your feet. The outcome is where the staircase leads, but staring at the top does not move you forward. Take the step in front of you.

PROCESS OVER OUTCOME.

REWARD THE PROCESS. THE PROCESS IS THE VICTORY.

6. Perspective: Compared to What?

Perspective is not part of the core system. It is a tool you can use when you need to widen the lens.

There are days when you are tired, stressed, worried about money, frightened, angry, or simply worn down. Those things are real.

But sometimes, before adversity becomes the entire picture, it helps to widen the lens and ask:

Compared to what?

This is not about deciding who has it worse. Your adversity does not become less real because someone else is facing something harder. Sometimes comparison simply recalibrates perspective.

The purpose is to keep one hard part of life from becoming, in your mind, the whole story of your life.

Two things can be true at once: this is hard, and there is still good in my life.

WIDEN THE LENS

Is everything bad—or is one part of my life very hard right now?

What is still good? What help do I have? What am I grateful for?

Use perspective when you need it. Then return to the present and keep working the process.

7. Appointments, Tests, Scans, and Waiting

Now the same system meets the real schedule of cancer: appointments, tests, scans, treatment, waiting, and days when the plan does not cooperate.

Appointments can feel overwhelming because a great deal of information may be delivered in a short period of time. Do not rely on memory alone.

Before an appointment, write down your questions. Put the most important questions at the top. Bring a notebook or use your phone to record answers in writing.

Consider taking someone you trust with you. Their job is not to speak for you unless you ask them to. Their job is to listen, take notes, and help you remember what was said.

Before leaving, make sure you understand:

- What your doctors know and what they do not yet know.
- What happens next and when it will happen.
- Who you should call with questions.
- What symptoms require immediate attention.

You have the right to ask for an explanation in language you understand. You are not wasting anyone's time by asking a question again. Ask. Write it down. Repeat the plan back in your own words.

Waiting may be one of the hardest parts of cancer: waiting for appointments, test results, pathology, treatment, or the next scan.

During those periods, the mind often tries to fill the silence with worst-case scenarios.

Be careful not to take the test twice.

You take it once when the test actually happens. Fear may try to make you experience every possible result before the real result arrives. That does not prepare you. It exhausts you.

The result is not here yet. I will face it when it arrives. What's Important Now?

Waiting is not doing nothing. It is working the process when you do not control the timeline: recognize what is real, release what is not known yet, refocus on the present, ask What's Important Now?, choose your response, and act on it.

ASK ABOUT AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Talk with your doctor, nurse, patient navigator, social worker, or treatment center about resources available to you. Depending on your situation, help may include support groups, counseling, transportation assistance, financial-aid programs, medication assistance, nutrition services, home-care support, spiritual care, caregiver resources, or help communicating with your employer and insurance company.

You may not know what help exists until you ask.

8. Treatment Days and When Cancer Knocks You Off Course

Treatment affects people differently. One person may want company. Another may want quiet. One may continue working. Another may need to stop. Your needs may change from one day to the next.

There is no single correct way to be a cancer patient. You are allowed to determine what helps you.

Your response might be:

- "I appreciate you checking on me, but I do not want to talk about cancer today."
- "I need help with transportation."
- "I need someone to listen without trying to fix it."
- "I do not want to be alone today."

On difficult days, lower the standard without abandoning the system.

Your response may be smaller today than it was yesterday: take the medication, drink something, eat what you can, communicate your symptoms, rest, pray, or simply make it through the next hour safely.

Your capacity may change. The system does not.

Cancer will also knock you off course sometimes. A procedure may be delayed. A treatment may change. A scan may reveal something unexpected. Or you may reach a moment when fear, pain, exhaustion, or uncertainty feels like too much.

You do not have to immediately turn any of that into a motivational speech. React. Feel what you feel. Then return to the system.

When the full system feels too big to think through, start with your body.

If you are able, put both feet on the floor. Feel your feet on the ground. Take one slow breath. Look around the room.

The physical routine starts the mental routine. Feeling your feet on the ground and taking a slow breath cue your mind to come back to the present moment.

THE RESET

Feel your feet on the ground.

Take one slow breath.

RECOGNIZE - What is happening right now? What is real?

RELEASE - What am I trying to solve or control that I cannot right now?

REFOCUS - Come back to the present. Be where your feet are.

W.I.N. - What's Important Now?

RESPONSE - What am I going to do about it?

If the plan changed, your response may be to ask another question, get an explanation, call your doctor, seek a second opinion, or give yourself time to understand what changed.

If everything simply feels like too much, your response may be to take your medication, drink some water, pray, rest, call someone you trust, or take another breath.

Do that one thing.

You do not need enough strength for the entire journey right now. You need enough strength for this moment.

The system does not promise that the plan will stay straight. It gives you a familiar way to return when it does not.

9. So What. Next _____

Baseball taught me one of the shortest resets I know: “So what. Next pitch.”

“So what” does not mean the error, bad call, bad result, or difficult moment did not matter. It means it happened. I cannot replay it. I am not going to carry it into the next moment.

In the few seconds between pitches, the whole mental system can happen quickly: recognize what happened, release it, refocus on the present, ask W.I.N., and choose the next response.

“So what. Next pitch.” became shorthand for all of that. Cancer simply changes the word after next.

- Next appointment.
- Next scan.
- Next treatment.
- Next question.
- Next phone call.
- Next meal.
- Next hour.

- Next step.
- Next pitch.

“So what. Next _____.” is not another step in the system. It is a cue to stop carrying the last moment forward, reset, and run the system again.

You do not know what will fill the blank every day. That is the point.

Do not try to play the entire game in your head. Do not try to live the entire cancer journey today. Return to the present, ask What's Important Now?, choose your response, and deal with the thing in front of you.

The circumstance changes. The system stays familiar.

The System at a Glance

When life feels normal, practice it. When life gets disrupted, return to it. When cancer gets loud, use it. When everything feels like too much, make it smaller and start again.

THE SYSTEM

RECOGNIZE - What is actually happening? What is real?

RELEASE - What is over or outside my control?

REFOCUS - Come back to the present. Be where your feet are.

W.I.N. - What's Important Now?

RESPONSE - What am I going to do about it?

RRR -> W.I.N. -> RESPONSE

THE PROCESS

Put the system into action. Act on your response. When the next situation comes, run the system again.

THE TOOLS

Perspective widens the lens when you need it. Feet on the ground and one slow breath can bring you back to the present. "So what. Next _____." is shorthand for resetting and running the system again.

THE MINDSET

Process over outcome. Care about the outcome. Live in the process. Stack the days. Reward the process. The process is the victory.

THE FOUNDATION

Do the work that belongs to you. Trust God with what does not.

You have a plan. Practice it until it becomes familiar. Then execute the plan when you need it.

10. Faith Over Fear

There is a boundary to what you can control.

You can ask every question you know to ask. You can follow the treatment plan. You can get another opinion. You can take the medication, show up for the appointment, care for your body, work the process, and choose your response.

And there will still be results, timelines, reactions, and outcomes you cannot control.

That is not where the system fails. That is where faith carries what the system cannot.

Faith over fear does not mean fear never appears. It means fear does not get the final word.

You can be afraid and still have faith. You can have questions and still trust God. You can feel exhausted, angry, uncertain, and overwhelmed without losing your faith.

Faith is not pretending everything is fine. It is trusting that you are not alone when everything is not fine.

For me, faith is foundational. I believe in preparation. I believe in discipline, routines, personal responsibility, and doing the work. I believe in controlling what I can control and responding to adversity with purpose.

But I do not believe I got here by myself.

"By the grace of God I am what I am." — 1 Corinthians 15:10

Without God, there is no Joe Pacheco.

Faith does not replace doctors, medicine, surgery, treatment, questions, preparation, or personal responsibility. Faith does not guarantee the outcome I want.

Faith allows me to practice the system, work the process, and live process over outcome without pretending I control the outcome.

Think back to the staircase. The process is the climb. W.I.N. (What's Important Now?) is the step under your feet. Faith is the handrail. You still have to take the step. But you do not have to pretend you control where every stair leads.

Do the work that belongs to you. Trust God with what does not.

Recognize what is real. Release what is over or outside your control. Refocus on the present—be where your feet are. Ask What's Important Now? Choose your response. Act on it. Then run the system again when life moves.

When you get knocked off course: "So what. Next _____." Return to the system. Work the process.

Care about the outcome. Live in the process. Trust God with the rest.

Faith Over Fear. The Process Is the Victory.

Acknowledgments

The mental-performance principles reflected in this guide were influenced by the work and teaching of Dr. Ken Ravizza, Brian Cain, and Justin Dehmer. Their ideas helped shape the way I coached and the way I approached adversity long before cancer entered my life.

When cancer came, those principles became more than coaching tools. This guide is my application of them to facing cancer, combined with my faith, my experience, and the lessons I learned along the way.

Important Note

This guide is intended to provide encouragement and practical mental and spiritual support. It is not a replacement for medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, counseling, or emergency care. Medical questions and changes in symptoms should always be discussed with a qualified healthcare professional.

Copyright (c) 2026 Joe Pacheco. All rights reserved.