KAREN HUMPHRIES

Holding the Helper

Supporting the Cancer Caregiver

INCLUDES ACCESS TO AUDIO FILES

What Others Are Saying About This Book

Holding the Helper is a powerful and compassionate resource that offers an honest insight into the realities of diagnosis, treatment, and the emotional journey that follows, not only for the person experiencing it, but also for those supporting them.

Karen combines heartfelt storytelling with practical, evidence-informed strategies that help readers navigate uncertainty, process difficult emotions, and find strength during challenging times. This is an invaluable read for anyone supporting a loved one through illness.

– Helen Spicer, Counsellor + Clinical Supervisor, Your Path Counselling Pty Ltd

I'm so grateful to recommend *Holding the Helper: Supporting the Cancer Caregiver*. Karen's new book is exactly what its title promises: a steady, compassionate place to land for the person doing the "invisible work" alongside someone living with cancer.

What struck me most is her thoughtful, caring voice—and the rare kind of insight that doesn't just acknowledge how hard caregiving is, but offers supportive, practical techniques to help you hold yourself while you hold another. The guidance feels grounded in genuine experience and deep understanding, not theory. You can tell Karen has walked this path and also knows, professionally and personally, what helpers need most.

This is more than encouragement. It's a resource companion for the tough parts of the journey—before diagnosis, through treatment, and into recovery—offering tools that help caregivers regulate, reflect, and prevent burnout. If you're looking for wisdom that feels both human and workable, I can't recommend this book highly enough.

– Verona Gibson, Clinical Hypnotherapist

I am pleased to provide this testimonial for Karen's new book - *Holding the Helper: Supporting the Cancer Caregiver*. As the President of Australian Institute of Kinesiologists Limited (AIK Ltd), I value resources that combine compassion with practical, evidence-informed support for individuals navigating complex health journeys.

This book is notably thoughtful, caring, and compassionate, offering a rare and valuable insight into the needs of caregivers and supporters. Karen provides supportive techniques that are both accessible and genuinely helpful, addressing not only the challenges people face, but also the wellbeing of the person providing care.

I recommend this book to professionals and members of the community seeking guidance that is empathetic, constructive, and solution-focused. It is a meaningful addition to the resources available for those who need informed and compassionate support.

– Verona Gibson - President - AIK Ltd

I've just finished reading *Holding the Helper*, and it is BRILLIANT! While I have not been a carer for someone through their cancer journey, I am a carer for someone dealing with high blood pressure and other heart issues, and some of this felt very relevant for all carers - those who are holding space and supporting loved ones through any healing crisis.

I loved all the deeper dive sections and the somatic exercises.

As always, your work feels deeply researched and actionable while also being relatable. You covered the whole gamut of emotions carers go through - from jealousy to resentment to exhaustion on all levels.

– Caitlin Grace, Mentor

Holding the Helper is an invaluable resource that shines a much-needed light on the person who is so often focused on caring for everyone else. It thoughtfully walks alongside caregivers through every stage of the journey, offering practical tools, meditations and support for their own emotional and physical wellbeing. I particularly value that it not only

acknowledges the challenges of caregiving but provides meaningful ways to navigate them. This is an essential resource for anyone supporting a loved one through diagnosis, treatment and recovery.

– Jacque Mooney, Simply The Brain

Holding the Helper

Also by the author:

This Is My Roar: Transform Your Trauma Tale

Holding the Helper

Supporting the Cancer Caregiver

A complete guide with somatic practices, guided audios,

and the tools to hold yourself while you hold another.

What if cancer becomes the experience that teaches you how to truly live?

KAREN HUMPHRIES

Holding the Helper: A guide for the cancer caregiver
Karen Humphries
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Disclaimer
What follows comes from my own cancer experience, both personal and professional, as a therapeutic practitioner, along with the research I gathered along the way. I share it in the hope that it offers comfort, perspective, and useful information to others experiencing an equally brutal experience. My hope is that this book can be your resource companion during a genuinely shitty experience. It is never meant to be, a substitute for the expertise of your medical team.

If you're living with cancer or supporting someone who is, please talk to their oncologist or care team before making any changes to their treatment, diet, lifestyle, or before trying any complementary therapy mentioned in these pages. My professional background informs what I've written here, but it doesn't replace individualized medical care. My suggested approaches are meant to work alongside conventional treatment, not in place of it.

I have deliberately not included any recommended food or nutritional supplements that support oncology treatment or care as some can interact with prescribed medications or therapies in ways that only your doctors can properly assess for you specifically. Please don't delay or postpone medical care, or step away from your beloved's treatment plan, because of something you've read here. Your medical care team knows your person's specific situation in a way no book can. That said, I've written this as a companion, not a clinical guide. I hope it supports you through the hard bits.

Neither I nor the publisher can take responsibility for how the information here is used or applied. Please take care of yourself, and let your medical team help you navigate the details of your specific circumstances.

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Dedication

(cue the tissues)

For my daughter, Lulani,

Your presence in my life has always been enough to soften the hard days, warm my heart, and remind me why hope matters.

I am grateful I fought so hard to watch you grow into your beautiful, authentic self and to witness the remarkable woman you continue to become. You have taught me that love is not measured by perfection, but by presence. By showing up. By holding hands. By staying when things are hard. Even by cutting watermelon into tiny bits after each of my surgeries.

This book is dedicated not only to you, my darling, but to all the sons and daughters, husbands and wives, family members and helpers who quietly hold the hands of those they love. To those who sit beside hospital beds, make endless cups of tea, advocate when voices are lost, and somehow keep hope alive when the path ahead feels uncertain.

Never stop climbing the mountain in front of you. When it becomes steep, remember to breathe. When the path feels lonely, take another one—or make your own if you must. There will be seasons when life carries you gently down the river, and seasons when you'll need to catch the train because the journey calls for a different pace.

There is always a way forward.

And when hope feels fragile, borrow it from those who love you until you can find it again.

To every helper reading these pages, never underestimate the power of your presence. Sometimes holding a hand is enough. Sometimes hope is enough. And sometimes simply refusing to give up becomes the greatest act of love.

Never stop being amazing, my darling Lulani.

Love always,

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A Note Before We Begin

There is a particular kind of courage in being the one who stays and helps out during the hard stuff. I'm not referencing the diagnosed patient who is at the centre of the shit storm. I'm talking to the person(s) beside them. The helpers are the ones who drive to appointments without being asked. Who researches in the dark. Who smile bravely in the waiting room and cry quietly in the car park on the way home.

This body of work is for you, the helper. I see you. I'm grateful I had so many of you to shelter me through my stormy moments.

This book is also for the tribe who hold space with and beside you. They say it takes a village to raise a child. I'm here to say it takes that same village to survive a cancer experience.

I have written from a place of deep knowing, both lived and learned. I have walked a personal experience with breast cancer. I liken it to finding a mountain lion in my fridge.

I witnessed something that no medical textbook could ever capture. There is an invisible labour of the people who love someone with cancer. I observed the weight they carry, and the mask they wear to hide their big feelings, which are quietly filed away. I saw their fear sneak out when they were tired.

I have seen my loved ones physically cringe, reacting when asked, "How is she doing?" Yet no one thinks to ask, "How are you?"

Cancer should not change your status in society, but it does. A diagnosis changes everything for everyone in a family. I personally experienced

cancer robbing me of my identity when I was a patient. And I saw it change my beloveds, who became referred to as 'the helpers'.

I continue to witness this phenomenon in others too.

As a community we need to resolve this, for the burden of holding an entire cancer experience for another is too big for just one set of shoulders.

Please note, I do not reference cancer as a journey. Cancer is a shit sandwich of an experience. No one chooses cancer or death as their preferred destination. As experiences go, it's been one of the most brutal I've ever faced. In saying that, for me, cancer has been an incredible learning and growth opportunity. I wouldn't change it, but I wouldn't choose it again.

Inside each chapter, you will find me referencing the **toolbox**. I've specifically collated resources that can support you to walk alongside your person throughout the entire cancer experience — from the quiet unease before diagnosis, through treatment and its long middle, into the often-overlooked terrain of recovery, and out through the other side.

Each chapter will continue to build resources that ultimately create a complete toolbox which is located in the second half of this book. It contains really simple breathwork practices (called somatic regulation practices), journal or conversation prompts, as well as links to guided meditation. I do not consider these supplementary extras. These tools are, in many ways, supporting you to learn how to manage your survival reaction by practising the techniques. Think of these tools as an invitation to deep dive into your healing process as you migrate a cancer experience, rather than sweep your stress under the carpet.

Understanding your person's cancer experience intellectually is only half of the healing work. The other half is you learning to return to being present and centred within your own body, again and again. Your healing is learning to land gently when the overwhelm of being a caregiver pulls you away from yourself.

"The patient is held by the medical system. The caregiver is often holding everything else."

The complete toolbox contains a collection of short, somatic breathwork activities. They are presented individually with short descriptions of why each practice works, how to do it, and what you might notice. They are presented this way to invite you to explore which can be stacked together to amplify the regulation of your nervous system.

Each chapter has a guided therapeutic audio. On page xiiiyou'll find a QR code linking to these audios that I have recorded specifically for you, the caregiver. Therefore, you can choose which breathwork you perform. Or you can use the written journaling practice, the therapeutic audio, or all of it. It's a toolbox designed to meet you where you are and soothe the stress wrinkles.

You will also notice, throughout each chapter, a section marked '**A Deep Dive'**. These sections invite a different relationship with difficult thoughts and feelings about this cancer experience. I'm not asking you to think differently, feel differently, or stop having them. The Deep Dive is simply inviting you to observe your thoughts as thoughts, rather than facts. This allows you to make room for difficult feelings without being run by them.

You will also find an '**invitation to reflect**', woven within the conclusion of each short chapter. Reflection is a powerful tool to gain deep understanding to your thoughts and feelings, and then discern how to take action. You'd be surprised at the power of asking yourself a genuine, open question that invites you to become curious about what this experience might mean for how you choose to live in this moment, not despite what has happened. When you observe, you widen the stress lens of how you're perceiving the world around you.

Using breathwork can support you to stay connected to what matters most to you, and choose actions that are small, repeatable, imperfect, and that move you toward the life and the person you want to be. Each Deep Dive builds, chapter by chapter, into a complete framework you can return to long after this experience has changed shape.

Each chapter opens with an Australian Bush Flower Essence illustrated alongside the words. This isn't decoration. Every flower was chosen specifically for that chapter, for the particular healing quality and vibrational frequency it carries. These same flowers are hand-blended into my bespoke **Calm Space Spray**. I have deliberately woven healing intention behind this book and support products to ensure your healing can occur on more than one layer. You can meet the flower on the page, or meet it again on your skin, and let both invite the same quiet settling in your nervous system, before you've read a word.

There is something worth saying clearly, right at the start. A cancer diagnosis is not automatically a death sentence, even if you only have days or weeks to live. There is time. You can do and say a lot with those precious moments, and they should be treated as a gift.

For many people, patients and caregivers alike, cancer becomes something else entirely. An experience that, while never wished for, becomes a doorway. Cancer can be a catalyst for growth, for honesty, for finally living the life that was always there, waiting.

You were born with the certainty that one day you will die. Cancer is simply a reminder of this fact.

Ok beautiful, let's begin, gently, with you. As you read, think of each page as me holding your hand right now.

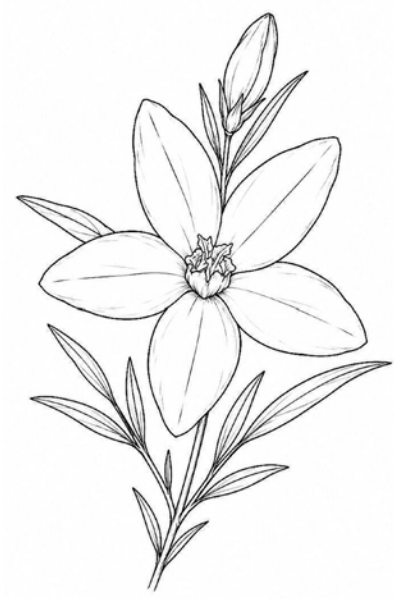
PART ONE

The Experience

CHAPTER ONE

Before Diagnosis

The Unnamed Knowing



Crowea

Restores calm and clarity when something feels 'not quite right' but hard to name.

Before the clinical answers or diagnosis, there is waiting.

And waiting has its own emotional texture.

The wait is a collection of moments that are stretched to a point of discomfort and uncertainty. It is filled with quiet stories and fears that spiral in your mind at 2am.

I can honestly say that there is a particular kind of stressful anguish that lives in the waiting space before anyone has said anything definitive. During the wait, something simply feels off, but you don't yet have the words for it. And your nervous system reacts to all of it, and treats that stress like a threat.

Perhaps you've noticed your person seeming more tired than usual. A lump that needs checking. A test being ordered. A specialist appointment that sits in the calendar like a held breath. Maybe their behaviour is a little off, their patience short.

Maybe you are worried or feel heightened, wondering "what if" thoughts?

In this waiting space, many caregivers experience something quietly profound: they know, on some level, that life is potentially about to change. And yet there's nowhere to put that knowing. No diagnosis to share. No crisis to respond to. Just a low-grade hum of anticipatory stress, and your nervous system is already on alert. Your survival mechanisms are primed.

"Stress begins before diagnosis begins the moment the body senses uncertainty."

Stacy's Story

Before her husband's diagnosis, there was fear. Stacy lived in that unbearable place between knowing and not knowing. Every ache, every test, every appointment seemed to open the door to a thousand unwanted possibilities. Her mind did what minds do when they are frightened; it filled the gaps with worst-case scenarios.

There was the fear of the unknown, the uncertainty that kept her awake at night, and the constant whisper that perhaps this was something they would not come back from. More than anything, she feared losing control of the life she had worked so hard to create. She feared that life as she knew it would change or, worse, disappear. And quietly, beneath it all, was another fear she rarely spoke aloud — that she would lose her husband too soon, that she would be left behind to carry a future they had never planned for.

A friend reminded her, gently, that being undiagnosed does not equal dying. It simply means there is not yet clarity. And clarity, when it comes, gives you something to work with. We are born to die, every one of us. None of us is promised tomorrow, diagnosis or no diagnosis. The absence of a cancer label does not guarantee life, just as the presence of one does not guarantee death. It simply gives you information, and information allows you to take the next step.

Stacy didn't need to solve the whole cancer experience that day. She only needed to take a breath, recentre, and become ready for the next step while embracing 'right now'.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Not because the situation was small, but because the fear was far too big to swallow whole. Stacy learned to wait for the results as they came, to feel what needed feeling when it arrived, to gather information, and then, only then, to decide what came next.

Fear has a way of demanding that we live tomorrow's pain today. What Stacy found, slowly, was that healing asked something different of her. It asked her to remain here, in this moment, with what was true right now. One breath. One appointment. One conversation. One bite of the elephant at a time.

The Emotional Landscape Before Diagnosis

What you may be feeling during this waiting stage may not be dramatic. The waiting tends to be more subtle — a kind of background tension that doesn't quite have a name yet. It feels both real and surreal, dreamlike.

You might notice:

- A heightened awareness of your person's body, energy, or mood
- Difficulty sleeping, or waking with a low-level sense of dread
- A tendency to swing between "I'm sure it's nothing" versus quiet catastrophising
- Feeling like you need to be more available, more 'on'
- A reluctance to name your own anxiety, in case it seems like an overreaction, or worse fuels the 'fear fire' that has ignited.

All of these are normal human reactions to stress. This is your nervous system doing its job. And all of it deserves acknowledgment.

How to Support Your Person

Before a diagnosis has been confirmed, your role is beautifully simple, yet genuinely difficult. It is to be present without fixing. This means resisting the urge to search for solutions before there's a problem defined. It means sitting in uncertainty alongside someone, without needing to resolve it.

Waiting for a diagnosis is one of the most emotionally demanding seasons a family can experience. It can feel god-awful because you're holding fear, hope, questions and helplessness all at once, without the certainty that naturally settles the nervous system. Yet this is precisely where your calm presence becomes the greatest gift you can offer.

- **Speak in grounded, neutral language**. "Let's just see what the tests say." Or add a side dish of psychotherapy and remind yourself and the person, "What are we in control of right now?"
- **Help with logistics** such as planning appointments, transport, and note-taking of what is discussed, without taking over.
- **Encourage early advocacy**. Support your person to ask questions in medical settings without projecting your own fear. There are no stupid questions and what better way to build rapport with your medical team that having big conversations.
- **Be curious, not directive**. Ask: "How are you feeling about this?" and genuinely listen.
- **Remind yourself of the facts**. Acknowledge two things (a) life as you expected might change (b) right now there is no plan, only waiting.
- **Co-regulate your nervous system**. Utilise relaxation techniques such as meditation or mindful walking to clear the head.

"Uncertainty isn't something to be feared. It is a feeling that invites you to activate the courage that will enable you to find answers, as you walk through the experience."

Supporting Yourself

It's likely that your body already feels heightened or stress activated. Beginning to tend to yourself now, before the cancer weight increases, is not premature. It is wise, and I promise, it is needed. This is a time to get curious about yourself. Even if the wait doesn't result in a cancer diagnosis, the reality is you've had a massive fright and need to discharge that fear somewhere.

This is a time to figure out how well you can regulate yourself, and stay calm during a storm. It's a time to identify the tools and people that you need to support you.

Invitation to widen the lense: Has your sleep changed? Is your body tighter than usual? Are your thoughts looping? Have you told anyone how you're feeling?

A Deep Dive — Contact with the Present Moment

What would you discover if you could ask yourself "What am I carrying right now that I haven't said aloud to anyone?". Anticipatory stress lives almost entirely in the future. This means you're probably thinking of scenarios that haven't happened. You may also be having the 'what if' thoughts about outcomes that aren't yet known. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) calls this 'cognitive fusion' with future-oriented thought: the mind treats a possible story as though it were the current reality.

The somatic breathwork practices in this chapter aren't just calming techniques — they are doorways back into the only place where life is actually happening. That's right now.

- Instead of asking yourself “will I be okay?” could you reframe to “Right here, right now, in this exact moment, am I safe?”
- What is your mind doing with the uncertainty of this situation — is it trying to solve something that cannot yet be solved?
- Can you notice the thought ‘something is wrong’ as a thought, rather than as a fact about this moment?

This is a great opportunity to remind you that a human has upwards of 60,000 thoughts a day. Roughly 75% of them are negative. And of that 75%, approximately 90% are from yesterday. Reframing allows you to simply label a thought positive or garbage. And what do we do with rubbish? Dump it in the bin or flush it down the toilet.

Before Diagnosis — Nervous System First Aid Kit

First Aid during this waiting phase is less about relaxation and more about creating enough safety, orientation and regulation for your brain and body to return to the present moment. Jump on garbage thoughts like you would a horse that wants to bolt out the gate. Use these practices as soon as you notice activation — tight chest, shallow breath, looping thoughts.

Heart Hand

Self-touch signals safety to the autonomic system

Place one hand flat over your sternum, press gently, and take three slow breaths. Stimulates the vagus nerve directly through touch, producing a measurable calming response within seconds. The physical touch is signalling to the brain that you are safe.

Best used: *Whenever you remember — waiting room, car, at home. No setup required.*

→ *Full practice in Somatic Toolbox: Before Diagnosis*

Long Exhale

Extends the parasympathetic phase of the breath cycle

Inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 6–8. The exhale is the nervous system's off-switch — a direct neurological intervention, not just a relaxation technique. The extended exhale is key here to enable you to drop out of your heightened state.

Best used: *Before appointments. At night when thoughts are looping. Listening to bad news.*

→ *Full practice in Somatic Toolbox: Before Diagnosis*

Visual Orienting

Tells the nervous system there is no immediate threat

Let your eyes wander slowly around the room, noting three things that feel safe or neutral. Dissolves hypervigilance by signalling: I am scanning and finding safety.

Best used: *When attention has narrowed. Before or after appointments. Pair this with Heart Hand.*

→ *Full practice in Somatic Toolbox: Before Diagnosis*

Feet to Floor

Grounds attention in the lower body, brings you back into your body

Press both feet deliberately into the floor and notice weight, temperature, and contact. Interrupts the stress loop by anchoring awareness in the present moment.

Best used: *Waiting rooms, escalating conversations, when thoughts are racing. Pair with Heart Hand and Long Exhale.*

→ *Full practice in Somatic Toolbox: Before Diagnosis*

Guided Audio

Before Diagnosis — Settling an Anxious System

A body-based settling practice for the uncertainty of the waiting period. Includes a breath practice, a grounding sequence, and a short guided reflection. Duration: approximately 12 minutes.

→ *Go to page xiii to scan the QR code and access your free guided audio for this section.*

Everyone asks how the patient is doing. Nobody asks how you are.

Nobody hands you a contract. But the moment someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, the caregiver agreement is activated. You become the strong one. The driver, the note-taker, the calm voice on the phone. You hold everyone else up, and somewhere along the way, you stop counting as someone who might need holding too.

Here's the thing: you need holding too.

I know that's hard to hear when you're the one who's supposed to be holding it together. But I've been the patient, and watched the people around me crumble while trying to hold me up. I've also been the therapist, supporting others through exactly that. This book draws on both sides of that experience, and on the science of how your nervous system responds to sustained fear and grief, to help you stay standing without losing yourself.

Holding the Helper picks up where *This Is My Roar* left off. You'll learn how to:

- Recognise your own mountain lion, even when it's someone else's diagnosis
- Steady your nervous system through the waiting, the appointments, and the not-knowing
- Sit with grief and fear without being swallowed by them
- Set boundaries that let you keep showing up
- Find your own tribe, because it takes a village to hold the helper and the patient

You can't carry someone through their cancer experience.
But you can hold space for them by supporting yourself first.

Caregiving asks everything of you, often while you're still working, parenting, or grieving in the background. This book won't tell you to be strong. It will show you how to stay soft enough to bloom from within, so you can keep showing up for the people who need you, without disappearing yourself.

Karen Humphries is a counsellor, kinesiologist, hypnotherapist, resource therapist, and trauma-informed coach who has spent over two decades guiding people through change. She is the author of *This Is My Roar: Transform Your Trauma Tale*, and a survivor of PTSD, breast cancer, and auto-immune disease. She knows both sides of the cancer experience: the one facing the diagnosis, and the one standing beside someone who is.

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