



## A Hole in My Genes: A Memoir

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**A Hole in My Genes: A Memoir** by Dr Jodie Fleming. City: MoshPit Publishing, Melbourne, 2019. 257 pp. \$27.95 paperback, \$11.99 E-book

To have empathy for someone, you need to imagine walking in their shoes. To have true empathy, you have walked in their shoes. Dr. Jodie Fleming (a clinical and health psychologist) learned true empathy for her clients the hard way. At age 37, she was working in a pediatric cancer hospital after completing her doctoral thesis in the area of psycho-oncology 4 years earlier, she developed two different primary breast cancers within a period of 2 months. Suddenly she had to negotiate the frightening and confusing world of receiving a cancer diagnosis, undergoing surgeries, treatment and recovery just like she had helped so many clients go through these stages before her. She did this only 8 years after supporting her ex-husband through his cancer treatment at the start of their relationship.

“A Hole in My Genes” is unique in several ways. Firstly, it describes the lived experience of cancer from a psychologist who turned into a psychologist's client. Secondly, it provides Dr. Fleming's clients experience with, and wonderful wisdom of, coping with cancer. Thirdly, it contains an impressive psychological toolkit for coping with cancer and cancer treatment. Hence this book is partially a psychology textbook, however, it is written in a more engaging manner that appeals to a much wider audience.

Dr. Fleming describes that despite her experience as a professional in psycho-oncology, the journey is still confusing and complex with difficult decisions to make along the way. It makes you realize that with no prior knowledge or experience in this area, how hard it must be to receive a cancer diagnosis and to navigate this new foreign world.

Dr. Fleming has a very honest writing style that makes you feel like you intimately know her such as a relative or very close friend would. She does not try to present things any better than they are. She allows the reader into her inner world—every thought and emotion. There is a lot of loss and grief in her story but this is overshadowed by the great sense of hope and humor Dr. Fleming has. Humor being one of our most helpful and mature of our psychological defenses. The humorous and creative book chapter titles will also make the reader laugh. “Let me take a men-o-pause” is very memorable. The reader can easily relate to Dr. Fleming as her balance of being both a health professional and a patient is done very well.

The letters that Dr. Fleming writes to her grandmother (“Nan”) provides a narrative therapy style to the book, where she is gaining strength and insight from a strong attachment figure. The letters are like a series of self-reflections. They also demonstrate how attachment involves carrying that person with you, *especially* when they are not physically with you.

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, everyone has a unique personal context occurring at that time. Dr. Fleming's marriage ended one month beforehand. Dealing with cancer as a single person without having children also makes Dr. Fleming's experience unique. In her book, Dr. Fleming features another brave cancer warrior, Sam, whose experience as a wife and mother of three children with cancer provides an alternative view of a different personal context.

“A Hole in My Genes” tackles the big questions such as, what is it like to lose your breasts? What is it like to lose your fertility? What is it like if you cannot take getting old for granted? How do you grapple with so many losses at once? The delayed grief for the end of Dr. Fleming’s marriage came once her cancer treatment ended. It demonstrates how the brain sometimes deal with major stressors sequentially, prioritizing the most threatening one first.

What stood out for me is Dr. Fleming’s book is that everyone going through this journey needs strong social support, especially people that you can be your true self with. People who you can cry and scream to and demand your fleeting food cravings to during chemotherapy treatment (she describes this as her Darth Vader side versus her Doris Day side which was reserved for everyone else however, this side takes effort). That is often our closest family and friends, people we feel the safest with, those who love us unconditionally. The book also highlights the importance of unconditional support of a pet, especially between chemotherapy sessions when you cannot get out of bed. Dr. Fleming’s connection with old friends and learning to ask for help when needed, are great life lessons for all of us.

Some of the more formal coping skills explained and demonstrated in this book include; acceptance, sitting with grief, disengaging from stressful thoughts through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) defusions and identifying values, visualization, journaling, a proactive coping style (such as organizing awareness and fund-raising for cancer), developing a good professional team around you, using internal dialog, relaxation strategies (controlled breathing, guided imagery, and visual imagery), making non-judgmental observations, using all five senses, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (cognitive restructuring, graded exposure and behavioral exercises), mindfulness, as well as acceptance and detachment from difficulty emotions and physical sensations. Dr. Fleming used these formal psychological strategies mostly between chemotherapy sessions and also while waiting for the many different medical test results to deal with the anticipatory anxiety and nausea.

Some very practical coping skills were also provided. These include creating life balance, engaging in exercise, sleep hygiene, eating well, yoga, acupuncture, Buddhism, finding your happy place (the ocean for Dr. Fleming) and celebrating the small and big wins and milestones. These provided some helpful hints of how family and friends can help their loved ones with cancer.

Finally, the book discusses the post-traumatic growth that can come from having experienced cancer. There can be an ability to live an even better life than before being diagnosed with cancer, helping you gain a different life perspective. Knowing you may not have a long time to live makes you develop and focus on clear short and long term life goals. If I can give you one quote from the book, it would be this wise piece of advice from 16 year old Alex, an ex-patient of Dr. Fleming’s, which demonstrates resilience and gratefulness articulately: “By focusing on what you have and not what you don’t have, you will always be happy and grateful and never be wanting” (p. 245).

“A Hole in my Genes” is an excellent resource on both a personal and professional level. It is a book that you want to give to anyone who is supporting someone or indeed, is going through their cancer journey so they can feel that they are not alone and learn from some of the therapeutic techniques and coping strategies that worked for Dr. Fleming. This book provides hope. It shows the strength of loved ones and how we can help our loved ones in this situation. I will be recommending it to my

clinical psychology students, any other clinicians in the psycho-oncology field as well as clients and any family and friends who are going through their cancer journey.

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