

Healthtoday

In collaboration with:



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AS HER day begins, so does her pill popping.

At 8am, it's morphine tablets. At 9am, she takes some Chinese medicine.

At 10am, Florence Heng is consuming some *ling zhi* (reishi mushrooms) which she believes has anti-tumour and liver-protection properties.

She then enjoys a short respite from her pills.

But by 2pm, it's back to the familiar drill – hourly intervals of steroids, morphine and Chinese medicine.

Florence may not live long. Maybe six months.

She has terminal breast cancer, and her oncologist has given up hope. The cancer has spread rapidly to her spine and lungs.

"You see," she said, patting her face and slapping her behind. "It's all

Sing and laugh at my funeral

Terminal cancer patient leads full life, despite the pain

bloated. It's because of the drugs."

Without her maid's help, she has difficulty wearing jeans and pants because she has to pull them up from her behind, and her left hand aches.

She is prepared for the day when she will lose the ability to bathe herself.

As she talked, she popped another pill. It's 2pm, time for morphine.

"Morphine makes me sleepy," she said.

But you can never tell. Her mind is racing with ideas for her next "project".

In August, the 52-year-old organised a birthday bash for herself. She spent six months planning for the party – doing everything from burning music CDs to planning *karaoke* sessions that night.

Eighty friends turned up, and the party was such a knockout success that friends asked her to host another one.

Her current project is to prepare for the book launch of the Chinese version of her semi-biographical, self-help book detailing her journey through breast cancer, said Florence, who only has a PSLE certificate.

The English version titled *My Journey with Breast Cancer – Awakening*, was released earlier this year.

The book is a collection of her journal entries from the time she was diagnosed with

cancer nine years ago.

"There's not much time to the Chinese book launch, and there are so many details to work out and invitations to send," she said, energetically pointing to stacks of neatly arranged folders of sample copies of yellow invitation cards with butterflies printed on them.

She loves butterflies. And big, bright yellow sunflowers.

Her home is adorned with butterfly trinkets and vases of beaming sunflowers.

These cheer her up, she said, especially on days when she is less than her spunky self.

"I have my bad days," she said. "The smallest thing can trigger a change in my moods. Sometimes, my children don't know what makes my mood change that fast."

But she is not complaining, because cancer gave her life.

"I used to be a timid, petty and selfish woman. I was a "people pleaser", doing, saying, and being whatever everyone else wanted me to be.

"It reached a point where I didn't even know what I wanted in life. I was unable to make even simple decisions."

Cancer changed all that. "It introduced me to myself," she said.

Very few breast cancer patients are able to stay this positive, said Mr Gilbert Fan, deputy chair of patient education and manager of the department of psychosocial oncology at the National Cancer Centre Singapore, particularly because in its

advanced stages, breast cancer has a tendency to prolong.

"Florence is one of a kind."

He may be right, in more ways than one.

Florence has already planned her next project – to cut a CD of songs with a few friends. She is baffled, she confessed, to explain her youthful vitality.

"Maybe I absorb *qi* from all the positive people around me," she reasoned.

Or maybe because three years prior to her diagnosis, Florence battled depression. That was a terrible time, she said.

"I knew I had gone through the worst already."

Her final project – her death. And she knows exactly how she wants to go.

"I don't want a funeral wake. I want a banner with the words 'Home-going Celebration'. I want everyone to sing and laugh. I want my ashes to be thrown into the sea."

Her family remains supportive of her projects, said daughter Joe-sie.

"It's what makes her happy."

It's 3pm now. Time for Florence to take some Chinese medicine.

As she pops some pills, she said: "I'm not afraid of death. I'm a fighter."

The official book launch of the Chinese version of Florence Heng's book is on Oct 22, 1.30pm at Chung Wah Free Clinic, Toa Payoh.

HOW TO COPE

Mr Gilbert Fan offers some tips to caregivers of cancer patients:

- Educate yourself. Learn about the illness.
- Assemble a care-giving team. Hold a family discussion.
- Develop a crisis management plan. Start planning in advance for difficult decisions.
- Join a support group.
- Take care of yourself. Give yourself the credit you deserve.

