

Support – A Cancer Survivor’s View

As a woman who has walked the long, lonely, overwhelming journey of Breast Cancer Patient and Survivor I am a strong believer in the treatment and support of the whole person. Breast Cancer turns your world upside down physically, spiritually and emotionally. I believe strongly that emotional/mental health support must be a priority in the process of cancer treatment. The only way I can effectively express my point is to share my story with you.

June 23, 2013 I woke up and was in the process of getting dressed to go for a run, it was a normal Sunday, until I put on my sports bra and my thumb brushed over a solid lump on my right breast. No one knows your own body like you. I felt it again to be sure and then I took a deep breath and decided to wait twenty four hours before saying anything to my husband. I knew in my gut that it was breast cancer and I needed that twenty four hours to think, research and figure out how to tell my husband. I emotionally shut down so that I could walk through it and make all of the necessary decisions. I felt I had to numb myself to protect my family and friends and of course myself.

That was the beginning of the longest couple of years of my life. Tests, biopsies, bloodwork, diagnosis, two mastectomies, chemotherapy, fear, pain, anxiety, depression, more tests. Being driven to be strong, courageous, determined in order to protect myself and my family from the pain, the fear, the darker side of the journey. February 20, 2013 I finished my chemo and the nurses celebrated with me and said "Remission". I should have been excited but I was furious. Remission? New normal? I want cure, I want my breast back, I do not want to be a survivor - I want to be me.

Do not let this fool you, I numbed myself any way I could but I was a volcano waiting to erupt. There were times I would erupt because the pressure was so strong but then I would pull back inside. Afraid, alone, tired, in pain, it was a pit. In the late nights when the house was quiet and my husband was asleep I would cry and I would try to muddle through it but I was alone and no one should go through this alone.

I think it was in March 2014 that I finally came to grips with the fact that I needed help to work through this. I was afraid, ashamed and desperate for help. I pushed through and made the call to ask for help, it would take about a month before I would sit down in the office of a Social Worker and begin to unravel my story and my emotions. I was angry, I did not trust, I was in fight mode because I had been fighting the cancer and now all I knew was to numb and fight. I was so lucky! The Social Worker I was paired with was amazing. He was non-judgmental, he listened, he gave me space and time and he built a strong support based relationship with me. He

became my ally. He did not let me get stuck in my pain and my darkness, he gently encouraged me to work through it, not shield myself and to learn to observe and feel what I needed to feel. He taught me coping skills and helped me find my voice. The cancer tried to rob my life but the Social Worker helped me find my life and rediscover my strengths, my gifts and my dreams. My Social Worker gave me the support and tools to help me recreate my life.

My story is not complete without sharing with you what happens if a cancer patient/survivor does not have the support they need. You need to know this. As my Social Worker worked through all of this with me I was able to connect because he worked immensely hard to build trust with me. It took months for me to build the courage to tell him that my maladaptive coping skills included self-harm and self-medicating - this was a long term problem for me which was exacerbated by the emotional effects of the cancer. Let me make it clear, I had fabulous doctors, nurses and family support but they had their own critical roles and could not reach me in the way I needed to be reached. Having a Social Worker available to me was my lifeline. He was able to sit and listen to my story over and over and over, and give me tools to begin building my own self-care. For me, the cancer blew open my entire life, it pulled me into an introspective and reflective place that I could not go alone.

I just marked the second anniversary of finding the lump. My life is dramatically different. By having an ally to walk me through the process I have begun writing again, I am now a student - 45 years old and attending University of Windsor for my Combined Honors Bachelor of Arts in Digital Journalism, English Literature and Creative Writing. I am rebuilding relationships, I am learning to let go of what holds me back and I am thriving not just surviving!

I implore you to remember my story as you consider ways to assist Cancer Patients and their families. Going through this and feeling alone makes the fight/journey so much more exhausting and difficult and that is unnecessary. We need to know we are not alone and we are experiencing the normal of life with and after cancer. Isolation is deadly, destructive and disheartening, please, do not let another person go through this feeling alone. We have a responsibility to treat the whole person and to help them find wholeness in their journey.

Barbara Hutchins

June 26, 2015