



Coping With Cancer

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A SUDDEN BLOW FROM OUT OF NOWHERE, FOR A MOMENT, TIME COMPLETELY STANDS STILL; AND THIS IS ONLY A RELATIVE OR A FRIEND'S REACTION. BUT FOR THE VICTIM, CANCER CAN SEEM ALMOST CERTAINLY A KILLER, WHETHER CAUGHT AT THE VERY BEGINNING OR AT THE VERY END.

At any age, the prospects of a possibly fatal disease, a known killer, are terrifying. At the age of fifteen, I was perhaps one of the most vulnerable to notions of certain death and loss. My initial reaction was similar to most as I imagine, when told my diagnosis on a sunny Monday morning in a clean, crisp hospital bed. The mystifying tumour which had attached itself to the side of my right ovary and which had grown to an enormous four and a half inches diameter and then ruptured, had been surgically removed the previous Friday and sent for tests and examination over the weekend. Meanwhile, my family, friends and I waited anxiously for what could decide my destiny. This was a very worrying time, but all we could do was to hope and pray for the best.

I had been told before my operation that the tumour (or 'lump' in the terminology I was given), may well be cancerous, or perhaps just a normal cyst. The latter was without a doubt what I expected, perhaps through subconscious fear of worse, or most probably because cancer wasn't a concept I'd ever considered. Members of my distant family had suffered and sadly died from the disease, yet after fifteen years it seemed so far away from my life, which I imagined to be invincible. I'd never even dreamed it could happen to me and on some crazy days throughout my five month ordeal and even now, I think that this may well be one reason for me to suffer, if there are any at all.

As the doctor entered my side room to bring the fateful news, I saw an expression on his face which I came to know well, and which you may do too; disappointed and uneasy. From the moment he said the word, my life changed, and I have never been the same since. A whirlwind took me and swept me away for a moment, and something suddenly seized my heart, as my hand flew to my mouth and tears sprung to my eyes. Before I knew where I was, my family had surrounded me and were seeming to crumble before me.

It was right then I knew something was very wrong. The thought of what I had was indeed daunting, but I knew surrendering was not the answer and brushing away the tears I began my fight there and then. I believe now that fighting cancer is the only way to survive it, and anyone facing the disease must be brave and fight for their life.

The first week or so was admittedly difficult for me, and once or twice I weakly uttered the words 'I'm not going to die am I Mum?', to the ever-sympathetic ears of my mother. After then though, there was only one option. Killing the disease was now my quest, and any anger I felt from that moment I would try to turn inside myself to kill the remaining cancer deep in my abdomen.

The hardest part for me though was yet to come. The following Wednesday after I'd been diagnosed as having ovarian cancer, I was transported by ambulance to St James' University Hospital Leeds, to see the professor who'd become my consultant during the course of the treatment. We talked about what the chemotherapy would involve, the various drugs, the side effects I may suffer, the wards I would stay in, and then I asked about losing my hair; something I'd always envisaged cancer patients did. To my surprise, not all treatments cause hair loss, but to my horror, the treatment I was to receive does.

On the 20th April 1995, at 9.25pm I was given my first dose of chemotherapy through an intravenous drip in my arm. I wrote in my journal:-

'First dosage of chemo to kill this bloody cancer. I feel strange, tired, apprehensive, but interested and angry. I'm ready, willing and able (I hope), to fight it and win the battle. With the support and love of my wonderful family and friends, my most cherished boyfriend and the good will of God behind me, I can and will defeat the monster which attempted to cloud and force me to question my future. We are ready.'

I hope this reinforces that it is most important for you to adopt the right kind of attitude from the beginning when facing cancer of any kind. If you value your life or the happiness of your loved ones at all, you must be brave right from the outset.

From April until August 1995, I went through a great deal of physical and emotional pain, and insanity, but most of all confusion and loneliness. I felt as though I was the only one suffering even though I knew there were a billion others in the same position. The problem was lack of contact with those others. If through your treatment, you feel alone at all, then ask to see some other patients or a Macmillan nurse; they will really make a difference.

I would sometimes secretly, and still do, ask myself, and God, why it was me who was this ill, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with asking such questions. While you are ill with Cancer, time and words become yours as long as you choose to use them wisely. You must consider very carefully what is important, and what you must do to kill the disease. You'll have so much time to think, you may as well think constructively. The main thing to remember throughout it all, is that you mustn't be afraid. Believe in whatever you have to believe in to enable yourself to recover; for me it was myself and the love and support of those around me. However, even with no-one, a reason to fight against cancer would be to stop it claiming yet another innocent victim, wouldn't it?

The chemotherapy treatment will very probably give some nasty side effects as well as the hair loss, so be prepared. Even those 'lucky enough' to have a very low dosage of the various drugs suffer some side effects. Common ones are sickness, a darkening of pigmentation in the skin around the joints, and a general groggy feeling. Also you will be much more prone to any infections, so watch out. These, and the many other nasty things that may affect you are terribly difficult to cope with, and often you may, as I did, find yourself asking what the point of this is, but hold on, and keep up the fight. Set yourself targets, and truly believe they can be reached. That way, no matter how bad things get, you will always have incentives to keep on going strong.

As well as the side effects I suffered, which luckily were few, aside from some nasty infections including pneumonia, at times I grew what you may call temporarily insane, and lost my targets, forgetting where to turn my anger and thrusting it upon those around me rather than on my illness. This is unfortunately all too easy to do and I lost valuable people through doing so, so try and avoid that if you can. Hurting and getting angry with other people only hurts you in the long run and makes you feel worse rather than better, so it is a waste of time. One of the people who I needed more than anything throughout my ordeal is also sadly the one person I continually hurt over and over, the one who seemed most vulnerable to my attacks of confusion. The one I took all my pain out upon didn't deserve it at all, and is gone now.

Strange as it may seem though, this person was the only thing I lost which I cannot gain back. I lost my lovely hair, and my holiday in Spain which was replaced with an equally wonderful week on the Isle of Wight, but my hair is now returning in the gentle form of a baby's and my sanity is coming back (slowly!), as is my level of fitness and health.

A lot can be gained from this terrible illness, despite it's many downfalls. If a positive mind is applied, and you survive your ordeal, no matter how many disappointments you encounter, you will undoubtedly be a stronger person eventually. You will consider things more deeply, and come out from your illness with plenty more answers than you went in with. Because I was positive and I had such loving supporters who believed in me, and also because I believed so strongly in myself, I conquered that particular cancer. Any cancer patient who kills the disease is then in remission, and the disease could come back at any moment, but if it returned to me, I know that I would have the strength to deal with it once again, thanks to being so strong this time. Some may say I have had youth on my side, and this may be true, but I believe cancer is an equally horrible experience for any one of any age.

If you are reading this as a newly diagnosed cancer patient, or the friend or relative of someone this unfortunate, I am truly sorry for you. I hope my story has helped you to think positively and perhaps taken an inch of loneliness you are feeling away. I went through a very up and down few months, with things getting more turned and twisted by the day, but I came through it this time and I hope that no matter how complicated or nasty your ordeal, you can too.

Never be scared when you hear someone say that cancer kills; this is a purely statistical statement, and you can beat statistics!

