

A JOURNEY THROUGH CANCER

Part 1

Chapter 1: LIFE BEFORE CANCER

I include a chapter about life before a cancer diagnosis only as a reference. I remember the day I was diagnosed. Suddenly, my entire life before cancer ceased to exist. The irony is that I was the SAME person on the day AFTER diagnosis that I was on the day BEFORE diagnosis, except that on the day after diagnosis I was aware there was cancer in my body. I recall thinking that, "ignorance is bliss," was very apropos. I felt robbed of my innocence. "Cancer is a disease of old people with old cells. I have a 2-year old son. I am too young for cancer," I thought. I was shattered. My mortality stared me in the face.

Most of us live without confronting our own mortality until much later in life. Unless you have been exposed to such a trauma, it is hard to comprehend how it feels to understand that life as you know it is gone forever. There is little that compares with the horror of hearing the words, "You have cancer."

It may be nearly impossible to remember your life before cancer for a long, long time. Eventually, though, life returns to a new normality, and most of us go back to our old ways. Life after cancer often turns out to be the same life as before cancer. With a little good luck and a lot of good medicine, the goal is to have a more difficult time remembering your life during cancer than your life before or after it.

Chapter 2. COMING TO DIAGNOSIS

The time between normal life, when cancer is suspected but not proven, and the day of diagnosis needs to be mentioned because it is full of mixed emotions and can be highly stressful for patients and their families. It can last a few minutes, days, weeks, or even months. During this time, patients have so many tumultuous thoughts and feelings that their behavior often changes, and their loved ones may misinterpret what is happening.

Fear, of course, tops the list of emotions. I believe that many cancer patients somehow know that a terrible problem exists before it is diagnosed. My mind played games to protect me from this realization. I remember thinking that I looked thin and drawn in the months before my diagnosis, but I attributed it to the stress of a new job and four little children at home. When I began to see skin changes on my breast and suspected they were from cancer, I was frozen with fear. To this day I am not sure how I made the decision to have a biopsy, but I am certain that my premonitions delayed my diagnosis.

Along with my fear and suspicion, I told myself not to be an alarmist. My family used to tease me about how I exaggerate everything, so I could not help but think that maybe I was overreacting. After all, I was able to work long hours, run five miles and take care of my family, so I could not be very sick. I kept telling myself that the swollen gland (in my left armpit) was probably from a virus or a shaving nick.

At some point, however, most cancer patients find that their suspicions and fears outweigh their mind's attempt to maintain normalcy. Then a diagnosis is made.

There are some patients for whom a cancer diagnosis comes as a total surprise, but in my years as a physician, I have met very few. Some suffer terrible guilt, as if they were out of tune with their body, or would have suspected something earlier. I tell them that even people who suspect they have cancer often procrastinate. Most of the time, it has little impact on treatment or survival.

Chapter 3. THE DAY OF DIAGNOSIS

No matter what road we take, there is no question that the day of diagnosis is excruciating. Personally, I was very happy to be under the influence of anesthesia drugs when my doctor came in to tell me. She didn't use the word cancer. "It isn't good," she said, and began to sob.

Giving this news is almost as difficult as receiving it, and doctors have a hard time mentioning the word "cancer." How doctors deliver the news varies. We have not perfected the art of giving a cancer diagnosis.

Being on the receiving end of the cancer news is like getting hit by lightning. At first, the word "cancer" causes shock. In me, it produced a visceral reaction with nausea, dizziness, sweating and palpitations. Most cancer patients have a similar experience. The first thought that crosses your mind is that you are going to die. This fear and the physical symptoms that accompany it can last for a long time. As a physician and a survivor, I am in favor of using anti-anxiety medications to alleviate these feelings of dread. They are not a long-term solution, but they can be invaluable in the short run.

Side-by-side with fear comes a sense of disbelief. Many patients feel they are in a dream. This is a classic example of the coping skill called denial, and it gives the brain time to digest the news and confront it while the reality of the situation soaks in.

Sometimes our loved ones and friends make comments that cause hurt and anger. One friend told me she thought I had been looking "gaunt" for a while. Although I knew she meant well, I wondered why hadn't she said something that might have brought me to diagnosis sooner? Such friends are really well meaning and have no idea that their words produce feelings of guilt about our own tendency to ignore important symptoms.

In the days immediately following diagnosis, most patients cannot bring themselves to talk openly about their disease. They try to keep it a secret, as if ignoring it might make it go away. The diagnosis is simply too raw to face. Over time, they generally muster the internal strength needed to dominate their fear. Most patients eventually develop a relationship with their disease that permits them to speak openly or even joke about it. But this does not happen overnight.