

## **Reacting to bad news regarding health.**

My reactions to being told I had breast cancer were probably similar to countless others: initial shock, grief, and then acceptance, and then working my way through the minefield of choices of what to do.

There is more than one type of breast cancer, and more than one stage, the medical options available are all complex yet you must make a decision, choose specialists, hospitals, treatment at a time when you are in a state of shock, and for many women, very little experience with life threatening illnesses, hospitals and such.

Studies have revealed only 20 out of 150 women thought they'd enough information to make an informed choice of treatment. A shockingly low number, but I can believe it. Health literacy is a rarity in our society - even among people who are caring for someone ill, never mind the people who are ill!

And unfortunately those who work in the medical field from receptionists to specialists don't realise, or lack the skills and time to ensure patients and clients do understand procedures, choices, medication, ongoing services and most importantly informed consent.

I understood that adjustments to my lifestyle, if I survived the diagnosis and treatment, would be huge. I'd have to adapt to a new normal and hope others could too. My grandfather used to say *God gives us our relatives, but thank God we can choose our friends*. How true!

We are born into our families, but can't assume members will give us added or positive support in times of need. I knew the various personalities of close family, their strengths and weaknesses, their busy lives, and the ones who'd only pay lip service to caring. However, I didn't lack friends – old reliable friends who'd already supported me at other traumatic times, estranged friends who reappeared, and new friends and mere acquaintances who stepped up to the challenge and more. There were others who receded into the background unable to cope and a couple who have disappeared from my friendship circle. But *c'est la vie*.

My biggest worry was the effect the diagnosis, treatment and outcome would have on my daughters. At 13 and 16 years of age they'd watched their Father die of asbestosis and cancer of the lungs, I had been their only anchor for the last eight years - they were 21 and 24 years old now, but both still at university, one just beginning a degree, the other finishing one.

I realised I'd have to do all of this in my own time and in my own way, whatever the journey would be it would be uniquely mine. I'd already had life experience involving illness and operations and loss of body parts - although my womb, ovaries, gall bladder and appendix not as noticeable as a missing breast!

I was also well versed in grief - close family friends gone, husband John gone, Dad and Mum gone. Illness and dying, and even sudden death a feature of the last few years.

I knew I had a strong personality, a high pain threshold, had developed some coping strategies to life changing events - could I drag all that experience together and not just cope and survive, but come out a stronger person at the end of it all?

And so in September 2010, I climbed aboard a roller coaster, one I hadn't bought a ticket for, and from past experience a ride I never liked!

However, change is a process not a single event - it takes time to understand and work through.

I never really had an openly stress response - I didn't scream, yell, get angry or look for someone or something to blame. I didn't really have a good cry - although that came later - and frequently. Nor did I bury my head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich.

In an eerie sort of way I had lived all my life with the shadow of my Aunt Chrissie's breast cancer. Her diagnosis the impetus for our family migrating to Australia. The effect of her radical mastectomy, and watching her die indelibly etched in my memory. Even although she was a paternal aunt and all the usual indicators said it was unlikely I'd get breast cancer, a little voice inside told me to prepare for the possibility one day. Perhaps it is the Celtic feyness - my Highland bloodline - or inherited Irish superstition!

It's easy to go into denial when bad news is given, and I guess initially I was hoping the mammogram results were wrong and the biopsy would be negative. A denial stage very short lived.

Most people have heard of the stages of grief: shock denial, anger, depression and detachment, dialogue and bargaining, and then acceptance and living a meaningful life. The stages after the initial shock can occur at various times and don't have to follow a set pattern, except for the hope you finally accept you can live a meaningful life. Each stage a hurdle that has to be conquered.

Friends and family want you to leave the experience behind but you can't it is now part of who you are. as my haiku states

**mastectomy shock  
operation successful  
a new me to know**

A person who has suffered a loss MUST allow themselves to grieve, even if they must 'carry on' at work or home. A grieving person should take the time to think about the loss, to remember the good times, and never, ever be ashamed or apologise for tears - for me writing therapy has been a godsend.

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