

A breast cancer survivor answers the questions you have always wanted to ask



Kamaldeep Peter on her journey from being a person with breast cancer, to survivor, and member of a support group

When I was undergoing chemo therapy in April 2013, it coincided with the fourth semester of my MBA exams. I reached the exam centre with a bottle of water and a bald head covered with a scarf, and walked upto the invigilator, requesting for a seat somewhere in the corner. Confused, he probably wondered what compelled me to complete my MBA in this state and at this age. Like most people, he didn't know what to say and do. Family and friends had their fears about the outcome of my exposure to crowds and stress, with my considerably low immunity. Thankfully, my fear didn't shatter my dreams of completing my MBA with distinction. I was 53 when I was diagnosed with early-stage-3 breast cancer. After an excruciating year of treatment including surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, my doctor finally said that I was in a state of complete remission.

Now, when I look back at five years of survivorship, I must admit that every medical follow-up to date was full of anxiety and fear. The beeping and click sound of machines ranging from a huge sophisticated PET scan to a relatively friendly X-ray machine, from a messy ultrasound to painful mammograms — everything would put me out of gear. My faith and confidence would see-saw, but I would rebound. Until the next scheduled visit to the oncologist now, I feel like a free bird. Each day lived, after fighting the monster of a disease, was dedicated to achieving my dreams. Positive thinking alone was not enough; visualising the joy of accomplishment was a kicker. Thankfully, my dreams had a long shelf life. I started taking short-term courses and participating in activities beyond my regular office job. As a breast cancer survivor, I joined hands with Dr Jayanti Thumsi, a breast cancer surgical oncologist, to co-found STHREE, a support group, in 2014. This was the most beautiful thing to happen from the pain I experienced.



With a heart full of gratitude and compassion, I started reaching out to cancer patients, survivors, caretakers, all members of the support group to see how we could together fight the upheavals and surprises that cancer throws our way. The support group assists in managing conflicting, suppressed emotions and mental despair by learning coping techniques, and above all, sharing tips to improve the quality of life. We strongly believe that no one should fight cancer alone. In my interactions it is clearly underlined that everyone's cancer is different, so here's what I've learnt from my own experience.

How long were you on leave during treatment?

I was not on long leave and I am glad I listened to my manager. He said don't stop working in anticipation that you will be too weak to work. Take each day as it comes. I was on leave only during chemo for a day or two. The mind is incredibly powerful when it comes to healing through positive thinking and by letting go of resentment.

Who helped you with daily chores during treatment?

In most cases, the after-effects of chemo are paralysing. I hired a part-time cook while trying to attend to other daily chores independently. This added to my self-worth and boosted my confidence. I continued to work for my company remotely. Let the patient decide their daily routine, as each body behaves differently to the treatment.

Did you lose your hair? How did you manage this?

From the second week of my chemo I started shedding hair. It came out in bunches. I cried a lot. Honestly, this was the worst part of my treatment. It made me conscious of my self-image. I started drawing the curtains of the windows at home so that no one would see me. I tried using a wig but rejected it soon. I would gaze into the mirror for a long time, feeling lost and helpless. But eventually, I realised that I am more than my looks. So don't fret over the loss of your hair. The hair will definitely grow back.

What about food and nutrition during and after treatment?

I ate as per a plan. All home-made, freshly prepared food with low amounts of spice and oil. A well-chosen diet of fruits and vegetables was helping build my immune system. I repented for not having taken care of my body for years. I feel my disease, to a great extent, was because of my wrong lifestyle. I placed others and their needs above myself. Every woman should take control of their health and accord it the highest priority.

Will cancer come back after treatment?

Let us have faith that we will lead a cancer-free life after complete treatment. The body listens to your mind and vice-versa. I now know for sure if breast cancer is diagnosed early it is treatable. So talk openly about breast health in your home, family and friend circles. Do attend breast-cancer awareness sessions and follow the guidelines suggested for screening. Always feel free to talk to your doctor about your concerns.

How is life after cancer?

I lead a disciplined life after treatment. I am conscious of a work-life balance, I eat on time, eat right, and practise yoga regularly. I try to have sound sleep for seven-eight hours. I continue giving my best at the work place.

Did you try any alternative treatment? Can we treat cancer by alternative methods?

I have not tried any alternative methods of treatment. I believe that alternative methods, if desired, should complement and not substitute conventional methods of treatment. You can always discuss new methods of treatment like immunotherapy, with your doctor. Shifting the focus from 'me' to 'us' through support groups has to a great extent diminished my fears. It encourages me to live my dreams. Joining a support group is certainly an individual decision, but it is highly recommended. The support groups of which I am a member are doing amazing work by educating people about the disease and leading them towards healthier lifestyles.

What would you tell a caregiver?

Do avoid being critical. The toxicity of the medicines your loved one takes, the long duration of treatment, her body's weakness, her changed physical appearance, impacts the way she is with you too. Remember the most important coping factor during the treatment is the support from immediate family. She shouldn't feel neglected. So don't over-think what she does, what she doesn't do, what she says and what she doesn't say.