

A Young Woman Looks Back: Losing Her Mother to Breast Cancer

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In August 1997, the wonderful life my mother had worked so hard to make for us came to an abrupt halt. I distinctly remember the hot summer day when we were watching television and the telephone rang. It was the gynecologist my mom had worked with for 20 years asking her to come into the office to discuss the results of her mammogram. I can still recall the frightened look on my mother's face and the suffocating feelings. I accompanied my mother and grandmother to see the physician and sat in the waiting room unable to focus on anything but the peach-colored walls, anxiously waiting for my mother, grandmother, and the doctor to come out of his office. I do not remember what I was thinking at only 11 years of age, but I know that what I was told shortly after was something I could never have imagined: My mom had breast cancer. I remember hearing "cancer" and feeling as though every bit of life within me was drained out.

I always felt as though the bond my mother and I shared was deeper than the average mother and daughter. My father and my mother separated before I was born. My mom welcomed me, her only child, into the world without anyone else by her side. As a single mom, she worked very hard to provide what she felt was needed, always making time for us to spend together. She was always there for me. I could have never imagined my life without her. We lived with my grandmother, who looked after me while my mom went to work, and the three of us were inseparable.

I remember, even as a young child, thinking about how lucky I was to have two strong and exemplary women in my life. I always looked up to my mother and admired the strength she possessed. She was a young adolescent when her parents immigrated to the United States from Costa Rica and she had to deal with coming to a new country, learning a new language, and adjusting to a new culture. She met this challenge and made all other obstacles she faced seem effortless.

Although the improvement in breast cancer survival statistics is a move in the right direction, it creates mixed emotions for me. Why was my mother one of the ones who had to die? Was she given the appropriate treatment? Was her breast cancer detected too late to be cured? Then I wonder about myself. Will I have breast cancer one day and, if I do, will I have the good fortune to be treated with the latest developments? Will I be a survivor or will I, too, die from this dreadful disease?

Everything seemed to move quickly after my mother received the diagnosis. She underwent surgery and had a radical mastectomy. I remember feeling so helpless; I couldn't do anything to make her breast come back, to help her incision heal faster, or relieve the horrific nausea and vomiting and fatigue after chemotherapy. I could only sit and watch as chemotherapy infused into the Port-a-Cath® on the left side of her chest, knowing that the side effects got worse with each cycle of chemotherapy. I never heard a word of complaint from my mother. I was amazed by her strength and courage. I am not sure if she internalized her fears and pain, but she appeared positive and confident that she would win the struggle.

Once my mother's treatments were over, life seemed to return to normal. The prosthesis and special bras had not gotten in the way of her normal activities. I also returned to being a normal adolescent girl. My mother, my best friend, was back! Once again, I enjoyed shopping, watching movies, and sharing stories with my mother. Two years went by and the cancer experience my family endured seemed long in the past. We began to plan a party for my 15th birthday and I was very excited for the big day. It was then that we received another dreadful phone call—the cancer had recurred. Our lives were torn and shaken to the core.

Impact of a Mother's Breast Cancer on Children

As many as 43,000–86,000 children younger than age 18 are potentially af-

fected when a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer. An estimated 30% of diagnosed women have at least one school-aged or adolescent child at home (Faulkner & Davey, 2002). Research has been conducted to bring to light the experiences, feelings, and fears of adolescents whose mothers are diagnosed with breast cancer (Clemmons, 2009; Mosher, Danoff-Burg, & Brunker, 2006; Stiffler, Barada, Hosei, & Haase, 2008). Common themes repeat throughout the literature. The emotional effect is riveting and lifelong.

Research has confirmed that adolescent girls whose mothers have breast cancer report more stress symptoms and higher anxiety and depression scores than other groups of children, adolescents, or young adults (Compas, Worsham, Ey, & Howell, 1996; Davey, Gulish, Askew, Godette, & Childs, 2005). Additional distress from the norm may arise from the developmental struggle for independence and self-identity conflicting with the knowledge that the adolescent is needed at home to fulfill the household responsibilities of the mother (Faulkner & Davey, 2002). In addition, adolescent daughters of mothers with cancer may be more distressed than adolescent sons because they tend to identify more with mothers and feel the need to support them emotionally while, at the same time, having the additional concern of their own mortality related to the disease (Faulkner & Davey, 2002; Lichtman et al., 1985).

Stiffler, Barada, et al. (2008) interviewed adolescent girls about their experiences with their mother's breast cancer. A common theme was the struggle of wanting to remain close to their mothers while, at other times, wanting to escape, ignore the situation, and participate in activities outside the home. Adolescent girls also expressed a sense of responsibility not only to fulfill household responsibilities but also the need to take on the role of a nurse in caring for their mothers. The study also investigated the emotions experienced by adolescent girls after treatment was completed. The adolescent girls expressed