

The long story ...

This is my experience. Not everyone will feel the same as I did. Some may feel physically better, some will feel physically worse, and everyone deals with things differently in their heads.

My diagnosis of cancer was horrendous. I won't lie. I didn't know which way to turn. "But I have a son," I cried. (I couldn't breathe.) I didn't know how to calm myself down. For a few days I couldn't remember how to do normal things, things that we all take for granted, like how to breathe, sleep, eat, drink, think, and smile. I thought of everything, believe me – treatment, no treatment, dark dark thoughts, you get my drift. I tried everything to take the fear away or help me sleep – antidepressants, diazepam, wine, hypnosis, counselling, everything. I just wanted to sleep through it and not wake up.

From that initial diagnosis, my life didn't feel my own anymore and neither did my body. The 'No ID Caller' came up on my phone daily (sometimes a few times a day), calling me to appointments for procedures I've never heard of. I wanted to scream, "LEAVE ME ALONE, I haven't even got my head around the fact I have cancer yet!" I had scans, x-rays, biopsies, bubbles put down my nipple, a piece of metal sewn into the lump, lymph node biopsies, a bit of metal put in my first lymph node, a PICC line put in. I had a fear of procedures, so this was extreme for me. BUT the nurses/doctors/consultants were amazing and nothing actually ever hurt.

When the oncologist told me I'd have to have 4 types of chemotherapy plus immunotherapy I cried and shouted, "I don't want it" with my head in my hands. Still crying, I asked, "What happens if I don't have it?" and no one replied, there were three people in the room, and no one said a single word. The silence felt so uncomfortable and all I could think of was the Eddie Izzard sketch, "Cake or Death?". I lifted my head out of my hands and said, "OK, I'll have it," and we carried out filling in forms as if nothing had happened.

The treatment was hard. I thought I'd be able to maybe carry on working, silly me.

Losing my hair was worse than I could ever have imagined. I didn't realise that I hid behind my hair – it's part of your identity and somehow you feel extremely exposed without it, as well as cold and like a cancer victim. You can always choose to wear a wig, but I found that uncomfortable and head scarves made me feel like a cancer victim too... so when it came to hair or lack of it, I mostly thought "fuck this shit" and wore a hat. Someone very lovely sent me a cashmere hat and snood – I still wear them now – it is like having a hug every time I put them on. When I look at that hat and snood now, they remind me of an old teddy bear. We have been through so much together, I literally love them. This is one of the reasons I built this website. (Thank you Bee). There's more ...

The first chemotherapy was really frightening. My doctor said he finds most people relax into it after 2 or 3 treatments and he was right. It's never a pleasant experience but you just get on with it, plodding like a tortoise to each session, going somewhere you would rather not but you know it's for the best. Even so, it's tough. You smile so that no one else worries about you but inside you're thinking I hope this is worth it. The chemo nurses are lovely and very busy, the anti-sickness and antihistamine they give you half an hour before you start can make you drowsy and then the steroids make you hungry, so I slowly munched my way through snacks whilst thinking, "get that bloody tube out of my arm, I want to be home with my dogs." You constantly worry you're going to have an allergic reaction to the chemo and the noise of the machines beeping is so triggering.

Lots more happened in between like weekly blood tests, postponed chemotherapies due to low white blood cells, PICC Line problems, stomach injections I had to administer myself, sepsis, adrenal crisis, an op, radiotherapy and tonnes of medications. Very low mood, exhaustion and loneliness. I had plenty of offers of visits but the energy it takes to talk on most days was ridiculous. My son would call me every day (he'd just started university) and that zapped my energy so much. I don't know how I pulled it out the bag to chat to him on some days, and make sure he thought I was doing OK, I didn't want him to worry and I chose to live my life through his new experiences for a while, because that brought some joy.

Still, I did it, and I'm here to tell the story and life is good, possibly better than before! I appreciate every single minute of every waking hour; I've got rid of everything toxic from my life and I don't sweat the small stuff. I'm fed up with looking like Noel Gallagher and Elvis, but my son said, "Everyone goes through a Noel Gallagher stage, Mum," so with his grounding comments I realise it's just a phase and most importantly I am still here, listening to "Alive and Kicking" incessantly and (apparently) way too loud.

I'm not a trained counsellor but I have had experience, if anyone wants to call me to have a chat about themselves or a loved one, please feel free to email me on julie10085@yahoo.co.uk. Put in the subject "Chat regarding cancer" and I'll get back to you to organise a good time.

Julie x