

Breast Cancer awareness month

October 2022

EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMME

DEALING WITH A BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS

A breast cancer diagnosis will naturally come as a shock. Whilst breast cancer treatment focusses on the body, it's equally important to pay attention to your psychological response.

Jenna Skews, patient navigator at **Breast Health Foundation**, herself a breast cancer survivor, shares some insights to help navigate this difficult and emotional time.

While the first reaction to a diagnosis is usually shock, everyone reacts differently. There are different types of breast cancer with different treatment plans and that, together with a person's personal history, will affect how they react. Feelings of anxiety, depression and stress are very normal. Others may feel angry or scared.

The important thing she suggests, is to 'feel' them – avoiding your emotions could be a mistake. She makes the significant observation that mounting evidence shows that chronic stress is associated with worse treatment outcomes in breast cancer patients. Mortality rates are much higher in those with depressive symptoms.

FACE YOUR FEELINGS



The positive insight is that dealing with your emotions can have the opposite effect. In one study, breast cancer patients who participated in psychologist-led support groups had a 45% lower risk of their cancer recurring, and a 56% lower risk of dying from breast cancer.

From the beginning of your journey, your emotions affect how you approach treatment, can affect the decisions you make about your treatment regime as well as the side effects that you experience.

While a cancer diagnosis is out of your control, you can, however, control your reaction and emotions.

The best way to manage your emotions during each stage of your journey is to work through them. Receiving a cancer diagnosis is a life-changing traumatic event, often involving the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Some may experience only certain of these emotions, or not necessarily experience them in that specific order. Your emotions will change throughout treatment, and you may also experience many emotions at the same time. For example, you could be thankful that you're alive and getting treatment but at the same time be angry that you got cancer. You could be grateful for your support system, and sad about what you are losing through this journey. Meanwhile, you could even be fearful of what might happen. Facing these feelings is the only way through.

As Bob Marley said: "You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have." I think this is the case for many cancer warriors.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Don't hide your feelings. Don't try to stay strong or act like everything is okay for the sake of others. Letting yourself feel your emotions will help you move through the stages of grief and find your 'new normal'.

Take things with a pinch of salt. When you decide to open up, some people won't know what to say or can even say some hurtful things. Remember that they're mostly trying to help – don't let those comments disturb your peace.

Keep a journal. Writing helps you process the emotions you are feeling.

Speak up. You are allowed to tell those around you what support you feel you need. Your support system is trying to help you, so communicate what you need in a loving manner. For example, you might say: 'Please treat me normally, not like a cancer patient', 'I'm having a bad day, please can I have a hug and a cup of tea', 'Thank you, I'm really not up to shopping for wigs now, but I would appreciate it if you drove me to my chemo appointment.'

Join a support group. Sharing your journey with others who understand can be very helpful.

Practice self-care. Be kind and look after yourself to build your reserves. Prioritise sleep, eat a well-balanced diet and get regular physical activity. Taking 'me time', like doing a guided meditation, will help calm a frantic mind.



So, the real message is not to bottle up your feelings and try to be tough but rather to open up and share. A good place to start is by making use of the FREE, CONFIDENTIAL, PROFESSIONAL support which is available to you through your employee wellness programme. They provide support for family challenges, medical advice, health and wellness.

FIND ADDITIONAL SUPPORT ONLINE

You don't have to face breast or any other type of cancer alone. Get advice and emotional support from these resources online:

Breast Health Foundation

The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)

References

American Psychological Association

Breast Cancer Now

Jenna Skews, patient navigator at Breast Health Foundation

Medical Sciences (Basel)

WebMD

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Let us stay mindful of caring for one another and ourselves