

## Body Image and Sexuality Forum

Real stories take time, we stopped telling stories when we started to lose that sort of time. Pausing time, Reflecting time, and Wondering time.

Life rushes us along and few people are strong enough to stop on their own.

Most often something unforeseen stops us – and it is then we have the time to take a seat at a life's kitchen table.

Telling stories can be healing. Listening to stories can also be healing. A deep trust of life often emerges when you listen to other people's stories. You realise that you are not alone; you're travelling in wonderful company.

**This is my story.**

I was diagnosed with advanced Endometrial cancer in November 2001. This cancer affected a large portion of my uterus, both ovaries and there was microscopic disease in 1 lymph node – Stage 3C. Not a favourable prognosis.

I was fortunate to be referred to a Gynae Oncologist – A specialist surgeon who treats Gynae cancers. He performed a radical hysterectomy in December 2001. That meant the removal of my uterus, ovaries, pelvic lymph nodes top of cervix and omentum.

In January 2002 I began a 6month course of Chemotherapy. The drugs used were Paclitaxel and Carboplatin. Then in the middle of that year began 7 weeks of daily Radiotherapy. This treatment was aggressive – yes – but so was the cancer we were dealing with. I was given the best chances at survival and I embraced that with all the courage I could muster.

The physical effect of cancer on my body was exhausting. I had 6 general anaesthetics in six months. Recovery from major surgery after a hysterectomy and further assaults with chemo and radiotherapy - these were the most influential factors affecting my sex drive.

They didn't all happen at once and I remember consciously thinking after surgery "if you don't use it you'll lose it" and the longer you 'put it off' the harder it will be – I was also very aware of the fact that my husband was just as scared as I was, scared of hurting me, saying the wrong thing. I knew I would have to be assertive if our lives were to move forward in a positive way.

There were a number of important factors that contributed toward balanced healing over the past 18 months. They include the psychosexual issues, self-image, and relationships with my husband, family, friends, work colleagues, medical professionals, and perfect strangers.

Our emotional and intellectual control over our libido is exciting, because it means that we can influence our sexual desire by the way we think and feel and the way we behave towards each other in a relationship. The biggest sex organ of all is the brain. The origins of sex drive are both biological and physiological. The biological factors include the brain and nervous system, hormones and physical well-being. Sex drive is reduced by all the uncomfortable feelings, including stress, guilt, shame, depression, resentment, anger, despair, hopelessness, worry,. Reducing or resolving your uncomfortable feeling is the key step to increasing your desire for sex.

Cancer attacks one's self-concept as a whole person as well as threatening one's life. Self-image is a critical factor in defining sexuality and the Chemo I was on meant I'd lose my hair – all of it and that created huge issues for me. It wasn't so much a vanity issue as much as having no hair meant that the disease I had entered the room before I did. I lost my identity through that stage and I feel my self-confidence and self esteem was damaged a great deal. I needed to re invent myself after the experience of cancer. I was reminded often that what the caterpillar calls the end of life the Master calls a butterfly.

During treatment I felt a sense of loss and violation to my body, often in treatment and recovery I was treated in a very clinical manner and this added to my sense of violation and exposure.

When I was first diagnosed with cancer I experienced a sense of loss, loss of my life as I knew it, loss of a predictable future, loss of feeling safe.

Human beings recover from loss in three distinct but overlapping phases.

Shock/denial, Anger/Depression Understanding/Acceptance.

“The Law of Love” is as fundamental and as universal as any other physical law. It is written everywhere we look, and it maps our intimate connection with the rest of the living world. A healthy relationship has boundaries strong enough to repel even the strongest intrusions.

Affection that doesn't necessarily lead to sex will enhance sexual desire through hormonal pathways. If you want more sex, share more hugs, kisses, and cuddles, with your partner everyday.

Without trust the idea of letting down your guard and getting close emotionally and sexually is very frightening. Intimacy means disclosing to each other who you really are. This degree of vulnerability requires a high level of trust. True intimacy is total- it embraces the thinking and feeling realities of both partners completely. True intimacy celebrates out differences as well as our similarities. Chemistry dies in relationships because partners stop making the effort to make each other feel special and important every day.

Caring behaviours of health professionals in my life played a major role in positively influencing my level of hope. Increasing my quality of life.

Health care professionals play a significant role in influencing hope in patients with cancer.

Inspiring hope begins as soon as patients become active participants in their care.

Maximising hope during disclosure of a diagnosis is one way clinicians contribute to psychological adjustment early in the treatment process.

At some point after my treatment finished I made a decision to let the doctors care for my body and I would look after my mind.

That was one thing I did have control over and it has proved my biggest investment in my health and wellbeing today.

Tools I am using are Positive attitude, meditation, research into mind matters surrounding myself with people who heal my soul.

Watching the Simpson's and Austin Powers,

Reading Far Side,

Enjoying music whether it's Jazz, Bach, Tibetan bells or the Hill top hoods.

I live more in the **now** than ever before.

My bible through those early days of diagnosis and treatment were ‘you can’t afford the luxury of a negative thought’

The art of Happiness Dali Lama/Howard Cutler

In spite of the suffering that I have experienced, I am still awed by the miracle that is my life – and the potential and promise it holds. I ‘m grateful - I’ve come to believe that if the only prayer you say in your whole life is “thank you” that would be enough. In a way I feel lucky because I’ve been give advance warning and time to act on that warning.

Because I can no longer ignore death I pay more attention to life.

I know that life is about 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react.

There are two distinct survival stages to cancer

- Physical
- Emotional

and that it is possible to have one without the other.

I would like to share a personal part of our journey with you.

While I received Chemo my hair fell out some wispy bits stayed. I couldn’t bear to shave them so I maintained my Freddy Krueger look. Any way Bruce expressed concern one day about hairs on his ears and I just lost it , what’s the joke he said? Look at us I look like Freddy Kruger and you look like wolf man, were going to have to make love in the dark or we’ll both be in therapy.

I have to say our lovemaking isn’t as spontaneous as it used to be, neither is it as often, but it is definitely more passionate and authentic we have discovered true intimacy.

Thank you for allowing me continued healing in sharing my story with you.