

Being Single, With Cancer

Introduction

A New Beginning

You are alone because you've decided you are unlovable, unworthy and unappreciated. You are damaged goods and no one could possibly ever want you. Your beliefs are killing you, and they created cancer in your body. You are single, and you will always be single. No one is ever going to love you.

Are you concerned about how to tell a potential love interest that you have had cancer?

Are you infertile as a result of your treatment?

Are you afraid the cancer might come back?

Are you discouraged about life?

Are you concerned about the costs of medical treatment?

Do you wonder who will take care of you?

Are you worried you might die from this?

I understand how you feel. I've had these same thoughts and questions myself. I know what it is like to lie in bed at night alone and scared and wonder if it is ever going to be ok. I have questioned if something is wrong with me because I am in my forties and still single. I have doubted that anyone would want me with surgery scars, missing body parts, infertility, and the looming threat of recurrence hanging over my head. I know what it is like to be a single cancer survivor.

In this book, you will hear from single survivors like yourself, who will share their fears, triumphs, and disappointments. You will know for sure that you are not alone, and that you have options for treating your cancer and living your life more fully. You will learn to take responsibility for your life, and even to embrace your survivor status. You will complete exercises to help you take control and create the kind of inspirational, powerful, and loving life that you deserve. You will recognize your own value, worth, and uniqueness, and discover how you can share your special gifts with the world. Most of all, you will get that you are truly and completely loved and lovable.

I invite you to read it as a personal letter from me to you about what I wish I had known when I began my own journey, and what I learned along the way. *Single, with Cancer* provides tips for navigating through each stage of your journey from diagnosis and treatment through survivorship and life beyond cancer. It addresses getting the support you need, managing the emotional impacts and it insists that you take responsibility for your own care and own your power through the process.

It includes my personal experience, interviews with several solo survivors, and results from a survey I conducted with about 100 cancer survivors from across the U.S. I was thrilled at how many people were so willing to share their stories so openly, and allow me to use their names in the book. Mostly I use only first names and in a couple of cases, I have changed names as requested. By reading the experiences of single survivors, I hope you will feel less alone and more empowered.

The survey results weren't surprising. The issues that floated to the top included: dating anxiety, body image, loneliness, fertility problems, and a desire for more support. Some reported serious financial issues or lack of health insurance, and having to move back in with their parents for help. A significant number shared how overwhelmed they felt having to make so many huge decisions on their own. Many of those I interviewed now feel called to help others through sharing their stories, starting a nonprofit, volunteering, raising money for the cancer community or all of the above.

Most of the well-known organizations founded to serve young adult cancer survivors were started by, and many continue to be run by, single people. Whether seeking to fill a void in our lives, or simply free from distractions posed by spouses and families, it is interesting that singles have played a major role in reaching out to help others through this experience.

Single young adult survivors also seem to be more connected to support services, perhaps because we find ourselves in need of more support. Camps, conferences, adventure programs and even mentoring programs appear to have more single participants. One year, 95% of participants in First Descents outdoor adventure programs were single!

The experiences shared in the book come from a wide variety of perspectives. Some of the survivors interviewed had also lost parents to cancer, and others had just left marriages or long-term relationships when their cancer struck. One signed divorce papers from the hospital. Another left her husband with \$20 in her pocket, no where to live, no car, no job, no health insurance and two small children, only to be diagnosed with ovarian

cancer two weeks later. A third left a relationship of 16 years in January, lost his dad in March and in June was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. In the two years this book has been in progress, several of the survivors interviewed have gotten engaged or married including Tamika, Jasan, Leah and Heather.

I wrote this book because I've been where you are. I've been afraid and felt so alone that I didn't know if life was even worth living. Cancer gave me the wake up call I needed to face my fears and take responsibility for my life. It was the catalyst for embracing my community, asking for their help, and gratefully receiving what they had to offer including emotional and financial support, wisdom and information, physical care taking, inspiration and so much more love than I ever could have imagined. As a speaker, author, blogger, facilitator, coach and part-time river guide, I have the good fortune to share what I've learned with so many people, and I feel so blessed to do so.

As I have navigated the ins and outs of living with disease over the past several years, I have realized that while the physical issues were considerable, my biggest challenges were emotional, and that being single played a large role in my experience, in how I saw things, in how I dealt with my illness and what I learned about myself and my life. I began blogging about life as a single survivor on my one-year cancer anniversary (the anniversary of my diagnosis), but little did I know then that my journey wasn't over and my cancer would return twice more.

It began with serious stomach pain on New Year's Day 2006 that landed me in the emergency room in the middle of the night with what I was told at the time was a harmless ovarian cyst that had burst. Instructed to follow up with my gynecologist, we soon discovered that the cyst had returned, and after watching it for a few months, my doctor finally decided surgery was required. Though the surgery went well, there were no complications and I was sent home immediately from the outpatient procedure, I knew it wasn't going to be good news when I got a call to come in the next day to discuss the pathology of the mass they removed.

After another more invasive surgery in which my right ovary was removed and I spent three days in the hospital, I received the diagnosis of stage IIc granulosa cell ovarian cancer. A medical oncologist was assigned and six rounds of chemo prescribed. Following that, a hysterectomy was recommended, second opinions gathered, and a decision to hold on to my "girl parts" as long as possible was made. Eventually, I did give them up when three new spots showed up on an ultrasound in 2010.

Rather than do more chemo, following my now third surgery, I radically changed my diet and began taking a more holistic approach to my health that included supplements, emotional and energy work, chiropractic, naturopathy and Chinese medicine. That didn't keep the cancer at bay though, and in December of 2011, two new masses were detected on a follow up scan. These were bigger than before, and they grew somewhat steadily as my blood counts rose over the course of the next year.

More surgery was debated, but my surgeon expressed reluctance to expose me to the risks of surgery every time something new showed up since it appeared this could be a regular occurrence. In December of 2012, four new smaller masses popped up where my ovaries used to be, and after six months of watching them grow, it was finally decided that surgery was required as one of the masses began pushing against a kidney.

In July 2013, a grapefruit-size tumor, and several smaller ones, was removed from my abdomen. After a few weeks of recovery, I traveled to California to work with an alternative cancer clinic that utilized a number of natural therapies, in hopes of keeping the cancer from returning. I also spent a week at a nutritional detox program that involved a mind-body-spirit approach, and pursued emotional and energetic healing techniques through these clinics and outside of them.

I don't know what the future holds for me in terms of this disease. I have the type of cancer that isn't cured after a five-year remission rate. On the positive side, it's not aggressive, so we are likely to always spot it in time to treat, but on the downside, it could come back anytime, even as many as thirty years later. Given that I have already had two recurrences in seven years, this seems more likely than not. I do know this: I may have cancer, but cancer doesn't have me. Since 2010, I have not lived my life as a cancer patient. I complete my follow up visits as scheduled, and take responsibility for my health, but I don't worry about what is going on in there. I believe that I am healed, and I feel great. Even with a grapefruit sized mass in my abdomen, I didn't experience pain, fatigue or concern. I am at peace about whatever happens next, and absolutely know that I am going to be ok – that I AM ok.

I know it is not always easy for everyone to feel the way I do. For some, a follow up scan causes major anxiety, and the fear is always there that the cancer could return, that it could be untreatable, and that you will have to face it alone again. I know that being a cancer patient can feel like a full-time job. I know that you might be thinking I'm crazy for

feeling the way I do. At times I have felt completely overwhelmed with the amount of time, energy and money it takes to eat healthy, juice, meditate, exercise regularly, date, spend time with friends and family, pursue alternative treatments that aren't covered by health insurance and, oh, maintain a career that allows me to do all those things.

Cancer is stressful in the extreme, and facing it alone can make you wonder if it's all worth it. I don't want you to beat yourself up if you haven't managed to be peaceful in the face of disease; if you don't eat as healthy as you want to, get as much sleep as you require or own a juicer; if exercise is something you wish you could find time and energy for; if dating and meditating seem like pipe dreams. It's ok.

Cancer is never easy, and dealing with a serious illness as a single person is a unique experience. Our ranks are growing as cancer strikes at younger ages, many of us put off marriage until later and the aging population loses spouses to death or divorce. Fifty percent of American adults are single and 31 million (1 in 7) of us live alone, according to the book *Going Solo*. People who live alone make up 28 percent of all U.S. households, making them more common even than those containing a nuclear family.

While there are a multitude of resources for cancer patients, there is nothing specifically for those of us who are single. Because of this lack of resources, I have long been interested in supporting Solo Survivors, and I started an organization to do so. I want to be your guide, to share with you what I've learned over eight years and three rounds of cancer. I want to support you on your journey so you will absolutely know you are never alone! It is one of the greatest joys of my life to coach people in discovering the truth of who they really are, and helping them find joy and peace and purpose in their lives.

So, are you ready to begin? I am going to ask you to forget everything you thought you knew about cancer, and about what it means to be single. This book will require you to step out of your comfort zone, stretch your mind and open yourself to new possibilities. You will be challenged to consider new ways of thinking about who you are, how much you are loved and supported and what you have to offer to the world. Though you may be tempted to skip over the exercises to keep reading the content, I encourage you to give yourself the gift of the insights each exercise can provide, and to recognize that doing them in order when they appear will set you up for receiving the most out of what comes next. I am so excited to help you discover the real you, the authentic and beautiful you, the healed and healthy and lovable and loved YOU! Let's go!

Contents

Section One: Diagnosis and Treatment

1. You Are Not Alone

The Importance of Connection & Sources of Support
Your Circle is Wider Than You Think
Your Communities – Including Those with Cancer
Finding and Asking For Help
Keeping People In the Loop
Learning To Receive
Every Friend Matters

2. You Have Options

Choose How You Want to Be
Choose Your Team
Choose What You Are Going to Do
Diet & Lifestyle
Alternative and Complementary Therapies
Weighing Your Options
Career and Finances
Choose Your Support Network

3. You Are Responsible

Listen to Your Intuition
Our Uniqueness & Genes
Emotional Connections to Health
Circumstances
Victimhood

Section Two: Survivorship

4. You Are a Survivor

The New Normal
Survivorship
Beyond Surviving (Thriving!)

5. You Are Worthy

Worthy of Connection
The Physical and Psychological Scars of Cancer
You Are Enough

6. You Are Lovable
Wabi-Sabi
Dating
Relationships
Touch
Sex
Marriage
Fertility

Section Three: Living Beyond

7. You Are Inspirational
Challenges Are What Make Us Great
An Inspiration to Others
Living Life to the Fullest Every Day
An Opportunity for Transformation
Great Escapes

8. You Are Powerful
The Power of Gratitude
The Fire of Commitment
The Power of Possibility
The Power of Surrender
The Power to Heal
The Power of Faith

9. You Are Loved
Intimacy
Soul Mates
Forgive Yourself
Loving Yourself

10. You Are Divine
Wholeness
Healing
Oneness
I AM