

Motherhood and Breast Cancer : The Woman, The Fighter, The Hero Fighting her Breast Cancer to Save their Lives

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She can create a lot more than the breast cancer can destroy

Breast cancer has become the world's most prevalent cancer since the end of 2020, as it accounts for 7.8 million women alive who were diagnosed with breast cancer from 2015 to 2020. Moreover, breast cancer represents the most common cause of cancer death in females. It occurs in every country of the world in women at any age after puberty but with increasing rates in later life [1].

Breast cancer mortality changed little from the 1930s through to the 1970s. Improvements in survival began in the 1980s with the introduction of yearly screening that allowed for early detection, in addition to significant advancement in the treatment modalities. In fact, mammographic screening has allowed a reduction of up to 30% in breast cancer related mortality [1].

Breast cancer treatment varies according to the stage and type. Breast cancer can be treated with surgical excision and whole breast irradiation if diagnosed in early stages (such as DCIS), or might require neo-adjuvant and adjuvant chemotherapy in later stages [2].

The discovery of the hormonal receptors (estrogen and progesterone receptors) as well as the Her-2 receptor led to the introduction of endocrine and targeted chemotherapy. In fact, ovarian function suppression in addition to Tamoxifen or

aromatase inhibitors have a proven added benefit in hormone-receptor positive patients in terms of decreasing the risk of local and distal recurrence. Likewise, the addition of Her-2 targeted therapy, such as Trastuzumab, to the systemic chemotherapeutic regimens in Her-2 positive breast cancer has shown an improved survival and benefit [2].

Despite all the development that was brought to this field, breast cancer remains a sensitive issue to women. Not only they are faced with the fear of cancer and death but also, they have to battle the changes that are inflicted to their bodies. Changes that are physical, hormonal and psychological.

Since the biblical ages, signs of fertility were long attributed to the woman's breast and pelvic girth. So how does a mother feel when she is deprived of a part of her femininity and motherhood?

"Life never really returns to the way it was before. You are forever changed, mentally and physically. As women, we already have many self-image issues without cancer being thrown into the mix. When a part of our bodies that represents femininity and motherhood no longer exists, all self-perception issues are immensely amplified. You will need to learn to love yourself all over again and appreciate that the person looking back at you in the mirror may not be perfect, but she is imperfectly perfect. And that beauty resides in her imperfections.

A mother fights cancer with very strong ammunition. The love she has for her children is so powerful, that it keeps her in the battlefield even when she feels like giving up. Cancer may deprive you from many things, but love is not one of them.

A mother telling her story: The woman, the fighter, the hero

Let me start from the very beginning, when I was just 16 years old, I felt a lump in my breast. It was a fibroadenoma and I had a lumpectomy. Every year since then, I would get a breast ultrasound. There were lots of different opinions from doctors, some encouraging me to keep yearly screening while others suggested it was not necessary. Thankfully, 20 years later, those yearly screenings helped save my life.

I had delayed my scans a few months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I hate to think what would have happened if I delayed them a little bit more. I had my ultrasound done and was called-in to do a core biopsy. I had done many of those over the years so I was not particularly worried. This time it was different. I will never forget the moment I received the phone call, yet I cannot remember the words the doctor said. I had to pass the phone to my husband as I broke down into tears. I had heard about many people getting diagnosed with cancer, I just never thought I would be one of them. My three children were petrified when they heard the "C-word". They asked me if I was going to die. The look of shock and dismay on my parents face when I told them I had cancer was painful to see. My father always hoped there was a mistake in the diagnosis. I saw pure love in my husband's face, but I could also see the hurt and fear he tried to hide from me.

I felt like I was on a plane when bad turbulence hit. I normally just close my eyes and pray and then the turbulence stops, except this time it wouldn't stop. We scheduled countless appointments. I remember the first appointment with my surgeon, he was very thorough, he explained a lot to us, but I just couldn't process any of it. I always had my husband with me during the appointments, he was on top of it all. I was unable to function or think properly. I felt like I lost control of my life. Nothing was in my hands anymore. I was a mental wreck. Every prick of a needle would traumatize me, I was so emotionally tired that everything hurt much more than it really should. My pain threshold was zero. I was terrified of any procedure; I would shake uncontrollably during scans.

We had to relocate closer to my parents to make sure our children would be looked after while we fought this unexpected battle. It felt like cancer was in charge, and as a mother it is hard to lose control. It had already changed so much of our lives and we still were at the very beginning of the road. There were lots of silent tears. I worried that my children would forget me if I left the world when they were still so little. I just kept reminding them how much I love them. I needed to make sure they really knew I loved them, just in case.

The day of my surgery was here. The day I would sacrifice my femininity to survive. As I was being wheeled into the operating theatre, it all hit me; this was really happening. It was not just a bad dream, it was actually my reality. I was getting a mastectomy with immediate reconstruction. It was the hardest, most excruciating experience ever. The path to recovery after the surgery was hard, both mentally and physically. I actually could not look at myself in the mirror for a while. I could not imagine ever accepting the person staring back at me. The drains were my absolute enemy. I hated them. My husband would clean my scars and empty my drains daily, and remind me how beautiful I looked. He never made me feel like I was any different. I was so swollen and bruised. I was not able to hug my kids for weeks after my mastectomy. I could not cuddle them. That alone destroyed me, and at that point I hit rock bottom. My kids started hugging me around my legs instead of my chest, they made sure they found a way to hug me and make me feel better.

My oncotype testing, a genomic profiling that studies the genetic and molecular risks of breast cancer, showed that chemotherapy would not be of any benefit, so we moved straight to hormonal therapy. I would start ovarian suppression and would be induced into menopause. I would also be taking tamoxifen for ten years. I read a lot about the side effects and I just kept delaying taking the first pill. It was hard to grasp the concept that on top of the mastectomy, I would be menopausal too. How was I ever meant to love and accept myself with all these changes happening at once?

Today, it is still a physical and mental struggle. I can now finally give my kids hugs but hugs are not the same anymore. I don't actually know if they ever will be. There is a numbness and tightness in my chest, it just doesn't feel like it is a part of my body. It's a feeling, or maybe a lack of feeling, that is hard to describe. I am hoping with

my final reconstruction surgery in a few months, I will feel more like myself again. Adding to this, the hormone therapy makes me want to give up some days. The hot flushes are overwhelming, the night sweats are dreadful; I have not had proper sleep in what feels like forever. The leg cramps and joint pain are occasional, but when they make an appearance, it's agonizing. I definitely feel the brain fog too.

When I was first diagnosed, I thought every time I cried or felt like giving up, I was not being strong. I have actually realized that my vulnerability is not weakness, it is actually my strength. Strength does not mean you don't get hurt; it means you feel the hurt deeply but don't allow it to drown you. Strength is walking down a long dark tunnel knowing you will get to the light at the end eventually. I may look the same to many on the outside, but cancer did break me. I am slowly but surely putting my pieces back together, with gold. The gold has been my children's kisses, my husband's hugs, my parent's love, my sisters' support and my friends' thoughts. Every time I feel like giving up, I think of my family, of myself, and come back even stronger.

A mother has the power to make monsters disappear when a child is scared, but there is one monster that scares her too; cancer. When you are initially diagnosed with breast cancer, the first thought that crosses your mind is death. You somehow normally assume you are going to be there for every milestone in your child's life, then cancer strikes, and it makes you wonder if tomorrow is actually guaranteed. It tries to take over your life, it tries to disrupt your daily routines and drain every ounce of hope you have. Cancer has its own agenda and it comes in like a tornado ready to get rid of anything that is not sturdy in its path. As a mother, the love you have for your children is such powerful ammunition. It gives you the strength and faith you need to stand strong when the tornado hits.

The first few weeks after being diagnosed feel like you are spinning out of control. You don't really know what you are dealing with yet, and the waiting is unbearable. You go to countless appointments and sit through them; your body is there but your mind is not. You can't process any of it. One of the hardest parts of the journey would be waiting to find out what type of breast cancer you have and what your treatment plan is. As a mother, this journey is a little easier yet also much harder. Children help distract you

from the world of cancer when you need a break, but sometimes you are so overwhelmed with it all that you are unable to give them what they need. Then mother's guilt strikes and makes you feel even worse. You look into their eyes and shed silent tears while you wonder if they will remember you if you didn't make it. You smile through your pain as you imagine their life without you in it.

The physical part of the battle begins, and with it comes another type of mental battle. A mastectomy is an insufferable experience, even with reconstruction, you are never really the same again. For weeks after the surgery, you lose your independence. Suddenly, you realize you can't even get yourself out of bed without help. You can't drive. You can't shower your own hair. You can't get dressed alone. You can't hug your children. You can't sleep next to them. You start feeling like you have no purpose. The worst part is when your scars are uncovered and you can't accept the person looking back at you in the mirror. You wonder if you will ever really be able to feel your child's head resting against your chest. You wonder if you will ever experience the true magic in a hug again.

Breast cancer does not give you time to recover. You find out that treatment is needed after surgery and it involves being induced into menopause. It feels you are constantly being robbed of your femininity. You are also prescribed a pill, a pill you will need to take every day for the next ten years. A pill that will cause hot flushes, night sweats, joint pain, brain fog and maybe leg cramps. It feels like for every step forward you try to take, there is always something holding you back, a roadblock preventing you from being able to go back to normal. No matter how positive you try to be, a cancer diagnosis knows how to play tricks with your mind. Every ache makes you wonder if the cancer has spread. Every symptom convinces you that the cancer is back.

Kintsukuroi is a Japanese art of fixing broken pottery with gold. They believe the repaired item is even more beautiful than the original, because of its imperfections. A breast cancer diagnosis can shatter a woman into many pieces, and she needs to be able to put them together again, with gold. She will need to learn to love herself all over again and appreciate that the person looking back at her in the mirror may not be perfect, but she is imperfectly perfect. And that is her beauty".

Author Contribution

- Sandrine Azzam and Lina El Murr contributed equally to this manuscript.
- Sandrine Azzam is a mother and breast cancer survivor, telling her story.
- Lina El Murr wrote the review of literature of the Medical Oncology part.

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