

Cancer cannot stop me

Cancer – this word sparks many emotions. It is a dreadful disease that consumes innocent lives. It is one word that flips one's world upside down and changes perspectives. Upon hearing the word, cancer, I shudder at the sound, as it brings back memories of the pain, struggle, and fear that I went through. Under those negative memories lies the strength that I mustered to fight this disease, and the motivation I felt to conquer it.

Cancer is not a foreign subject for me. My mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 49 years old. She was very strong and fought cancer with courage. I have never seen anybody go about their daily activities after a chemotherapy session. She even managed a factory during her treatments. She was one of the most active person, and never complained about any discomfort throughout her journey. When she succumbed to her illness after 7 years of remission, I believed that she would fight this battle with just as much vigor as her first. Unfortunately, the metastasis was too much for her to handle. However, through her journey, I acquired her positivity and determination which resonated with me, as I began my own journey with breast cancer.

I had been getting regular mammograms and physicals for years. In June 2020, when I felt a lump and visited my physician, I was surprised to hear the possibility of it being cancer. When the diagnosis was positive for cancer, just like all survivors and fighters, the first thought that came to my mind was "why me," but then I thought about my mom, and how courageous she was during her journey. Cancer did not stop her. She would do everything from taking care of business to managing household chores. This gave me the strength and inspiration to fight this. My next thought was, "What now?"

Before I started on my journey into this cancer treatment, I made myself a list of some do's and do not's.

My top three do's were:

Be positive: Each treatment that I went through felt like a breaking point. I think about the pain I endured between the surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation, and I remember what pushed me through it. With a disease like cancer, it is easy to feel low, depressed, and anxious. I had to stay positive, and trust that everything will work out the correct way. After chemotherapy, especially

closer to the last sessions, I felt emotionally drained and very tired. I would think about my mother, and how strong she was when she went through her chemo. I relied on her memory to keep me positive, as she was.

Have a support system: With a debilitating disease like cancer, it is important to not isolate. My husband, my daughter, and my son-in-law were my pillars of strength during this time. They were by my side through every surgery, chemotherapy session, and radiation appointment. My daughter told me that I have taken care of the family, and now it was time for the family to take care of me.

Beyond my family, I found a community within the Breast Cancer Hub support group, where I could lean to get answers and help others who are going through similar experiences. This support group made me feel connected, and not alone in this journey.

Set a fun goal: As with many diseases, it is hard to think ahead. Setting long- and short-term fun goals or activities can help feel like there is something to look forward to. One of the long-term goals that I set for myself was to be better and more active before my daughter's wedding. The excitement of a wedding in the family, and that of my only daughter kept the spirits up in the house. I remember a time when I just had surgery and my son-in-law called me telling me that he just got the ring to propose. That conversation helped me go through the pain, and kept me pushing forward of the third surgery I had to have.

It is also important to make time for fun activities as well, even when the treatments are happening. On one of my worst days of chemotherapy, my daughter sat with me and we watched the final match of the Indian Premier League cricket tournament. It was something that we planned for weeks, and we were excited to spend that time together.

My top three do not's were:

No negativity: The negativity could come from internal or external sources. I had to muster my strength to make sure that I did not fall prey to these negative thoughts. When chemotherapy started, and I was starting to lose my hair, I felt like I was losing who I am. My wonderful support system and I spun it to be more positive. We bought many beautiful caps to match different outfits.

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We shaved my head together before all of it fell out. The important thing is that we laughed, and we laughed a lot during this time. It is true when they say that laughter is the best medicine.

No stress: Treatments and surgeries are stressful on your physical body, but what about mental stress? Finding peace in activity helped me relieve the stress of going through these treatments. I found solitude in religion, scriptures, and songs. Every morning, I would start by listening to chants. I joined a class that analyzed the Ramayana and Mahabharata texts and found wisdom within them. I was able to find a sense of calm within my own religion. It does not matter where one finds their happy place, as long as it brings you the peace of mind needed to go through the mental, physical, and emotional trauma.

No discouragers: It may sound funny, but what I encourage is to surround yourself with people who encourage your well-being and your progress. Having positive and encouraging people around me made me feel like I had people to rely on, beyond my immediate support group. The people who you surround yourself with may not even know you are going through this treatment, but the energy that they provide affects your own well-being. When I surrounded myself with people who bring positive energy to my life, I instantly felt better. On the opposite end, when I was around toxic or negative energy people, I felt my battery drain as well. To keep my spirits up, I will always surround myself with people who bring out the best in me.

This journey was a roller coaster of emotions from start to finish, but what I learned from the experience was invaluable. I learned that I was stronger than I thought; when I wanted to break down, the warrior in me came out. I learned that I had so many supporters, community members, friends, and family that wanted the best for me, and they all wanted to see me thrive. I learned that I

can find peace and calm in the hairiest of situations and that I was able to handle them with grace and confidence. I now see myself as a warrior, an embodiment of strength and most importantly, I am a Survivor.

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Sarika Mohan

Member, Breast Cancer Hub, USA

Address for correspondence:

Mrs. Sarika Mohan,
Breast Cancer Hub, 9637 Camden Town Dr, Concord,
NC 28027, USA.
E-mail: sarikas12015@gmail.com

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