



Five Years and Counting

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Oncology professionals are fully aware that the five-year mark of being disease-free after the diagnosis of cancer is not a magical number. Cancer is now considered a chronic disease and recurrence can happen at any time, which is unexpected and frightening. Yet, for me, and for many other cancer survivors, the five-year mark is one to be celebrated.

I celebrated my five-year mark as a survivor in 2012, a journey that has been shared with colleagues in previous publications (Bush, 2008, 2009, 2010). In many ways, my five years has passed too quickly and, in other ways, I have experienced each and every moment of my survivorship.

Survivorship is defined as starting at the moment of diagnosis. Personally, I have experienced challenges to this definition. My timeline is somewhat blurred, but I don't believe that I truly felt like a survivor until two or three years postdiagnosis. Survivorship wasn't defined by my time since diagnosis as much as how long it took for me to return to a "new normal" of life and activity, putting the everyday residual effects of treatment behind me.

I wrote previously about my shock at diagnosis of both ovarian and breast cancer simultaneously (Bush, 2008). I also shared my tumultuous journey of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bush, 2009, 2010). I am grateful for the many professionals and patients who have read about my journey and have responded positively to my lessons learned and wisdom gained.

As an oncology nurse, I began my journey by attempting to prove that I could be as brave and strong as the many patients I had taken care of, counseled, and supported. I envisioned that I could use my good nature, humor, and steadfastness to face the challenges of hair loss, job loss, chronic fatigue, neuropathy, and cognitive dysfunction. I forged ahead through numerous surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation with tenacity. It wasn't until

after treatment ended and I chose to leave my position as an oncology nurse practitioner that the reality of my experiences became overwhelming. Confronted with the realization that I wasn't emotionally or physically prepared to return to my position in a breast cancer clinic was felt, by me, to be a failure to adequately cope. The depression that set in evolved into what was diagnosed as PTSD. I relived many experiences through flashbacks and unsettling feelings of anxiety. Uncertainty prevailed—how was I going to redefine myself and move forward with my life?

My recovery was gradual and took place in baby steps. Personally, my first steps began in psychotherapy to treat the underlying depression and the PTSD that had overtaken my psyche. My next steps were to return to my role as a teacher of graduate nursing. I didn't feel prepared emotionally to return to my role as an oncology nurse practitioner—in the trenches, so to speak. I had my own trenches that I was slugging through.

When did survivorship begin for me? Gradually the chronic fatigue began to fade and I returned to an individual exercise program to boost my energy. Medication helped to ease my depression and balance my sleep. My teaching job proved fruitful and I was able to continue to participate in my specialty of oncology, which proved to be rewarding. It took quite a few years to integrate a new normal and to truly feel that I had survived the cancer experience. I reached a point when I began to envision a bright future without cancer hounding me (Not to say

that six-month scans and check-up appointments don't bring their own set of fears of recurrent disease.).

I celebrated my five-year survival on the 4th of July by toasting champagne as the fireworks exploded in the beautiful sky above the ocean. I felt immensely grateful for surviving not only the cancer but also for rebuilding my life successfully, integrating the strength and wisdom that the journey had taught me. It has taken this long to often forget that I am still a person with a cancer history, this long to feel hopeful that I have won this battle. If not, I am thankful that I have gained the perseverance to carry me forward.

So when does survivorship really begin? I think that, not unlike the cancer experience, the beginning of survivorship is different for each individual. Is it at the time of diagnosis, the end of treatment, or the integration of a new normal? Is it at the one-, two-, three-, four-, or five-year mark or beyond? I believe that the year that marks the turning point for each individual depends on their personal journey. For me, I am five years and counting.

References

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