

The long-term effects of treatment for breast cancer

Psychotherapist
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from first-hand
experience about the
personal and
professional
consequences of
surviving the disease

To the extent that we ever talk about the long-term effects of treatment for breast cancer, conventional thinking on the subject usually says that the treatments' effects are mostly temporary and that chemotherapy's long-term effects are greater than radiotherapy's. A culture of silence seems to predominate where the long-term effects of the various treatments for the disease are concerned, though these long-term effects significantly affect the lives of many women who survive the disease, long after the treatments end. Moreover, some of these effects can worsen over time.

At diagnosis

When I was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, there was little doubt in my mind that I would surrender myself to conventional treatment. I was terrified I was going to die, so I wanted the cancerous lesion in my right breast out of me as soon as humanly possible.

Surgically, I was offered only one option, which was a wide local excision, in effect a lumpectomy, definitely followed by radiotherapy, maybe chemotherapy, depending on how aggressive the cancer proved to be. I wondered about having a mastectomy, but was told point blank that that would be too radical, given that my cancer was most likely not very advanced. In many ways, this was good news since I wanted the least invasive procedure possible, which was, effectively, the lesion removed, plus the smallest amount of tissue possible from around it.

At the time, it did not occur to me that if I lived several years beyond

diagnosis, I would end up fairly disabled by the long-term effects of these treatments, and those treating me considered my treatment to be conservative. Indeed, compared to what some women with breast cancer have to endure, they were right. Moreover, nobody, including me, was really focusing on anything other than the immediate crisis situation. All I cared about in those early days was whether my cancer was contained or not, as in, had it spread to my lymph nodes, bones, etc? I was living minute to minute, terrified my number was up and I was going to die, but also in numb shock.

In the event, the results came back saying the cancer was contained – an agonising time waiting, but very good news. I was in a lot of pain because the surgeon had made a very large incision from my right armpit, right down the side of my breast. However, to the extent that I thought about it, I just assumed that it would heal and cause me no further problems. I was focused on feeling relieved that my cancer was contained and that I wouldn't need chemotherapy, but dreading radiotherapy, which was such an unknown to me at that time.

During radiotherapy, which was such a hard experience both physically and emotionally, again I didn't think in terms of its long-term effects, though the extremity of the treatment's effects at the time took me by surprise – bad burns and systemic effects I hadn't expected, like extreme nausea, dizziness and general malaise. I also had not expected to feel so vulnerable lying on the radiotherapy table, or for past traumas to be stirred up by the experience¹.

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