Journey to Recovery: A Breast Cancer Podcast Series

Episode 1, Part 1: A Breast Cancer Diagnosis

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Doreen: When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I felt shocked -- extremely shocked -- and I felt like I was hit by a Mack truck. I didn't understand a lot of it, but the doctor was very sensitive and very clear.

Woman 2: After I got this diagnosis, I felt that I was invaded by a foreign object that had no business being in my body. I was shocked, I was hurt, but I knew that was only for a moment that it was going to be there.

Narrator: The road from cancer diagnosis to survivorship is a journey that offers many twists and turns. Some of these turns may be trying and difficult, and others may offer unexpected comfort. We at the American Cancer Society hope that this podcast series will let women who are dealing with breast cancer know that they're not alone.

Each of the five episodes in this podcast series touches on a number of different topics that may concern women who've been diagnosed with the disease. These topics include diagnosis, treatment options, surgery and recovery, chemotherapy and radiation, and survivorship and support.

More importantly, you'll hear breast cancer survivors share their own thoughts, feelings and ideas from their own breast cancer experiences. Their voices are woven throughout this episode, each providing you with a unique perspective of someone who has already experienced what you may currently be going through.

This episode is about the diagnosis experience. We'll explain some medical terms that you may hear during your cancer journey, and hope that this will help you better understand what is being said to you. Knowing these terms will also help you communicate clearly with your health care professional.

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Narrator: So what is breast cancer? Dr. Margaret Kemeny, a nationally renowned surgical oncologist and director of the Queens Cancer Center of Queens Hospital, is with us to help make some sense of the clinical information about breast cancer. Dr. Kemeny, thanks for joining us.

Dr. Margaret Kemeny: Thank you for inviting me.

Narrator: Dr. Kemeny, first let's talk a little bit about the disease. Tell us exactly, what is breast cancer?

Dr. Kemeny: Breast cancer is a tumor that starts from cells of the breast. Since a woman's breast is made up of lobules, which are the glands that make breast milk, and ducts, the small tubes that connect the lobules to the nipple, the cancer can start in either of these two types of cells.

Lymph vessels are veins that carry lymph fluid instead of the blood, and lead it to the lymph nodes. Most
lymph vessels of the breasts lead to the lymph nodes underneath the arm. If breast cancer cells reach the underarm lymph nodes and continue to grow, they cause the nodes to swell. Once the cancer have reached these nodes, they're more likely to spread to other parts of the body.

**Narrator:** The most common types of breast cancer include carcinoma in-situ, infiltrating or invasive ductal carcinoma, and ductal carcinoma in-situ. Carcinoma in-situ is a term used for early-stage cancer, when the cancer is still in the place where it first developed. In breast cancer, it means that the cancer is confined to the ducts or the lobules, and has not spread to the surrounding fatty breast tissue or other parts of the body.

Infiltrating or invasive ductal carcinoma is the most common type of breast cancer, and accounts for about 80% of invasive breast cancers. It starts in a milk passage or duct, breaks through the duct walls, and invades the surrounding fatty breast tissue. From there, it can spread to other parts of the body.

Ductal carcinoma in-situ is the most common type of non-invasive breast cancer. DCIS means that the cancer is confined to the ducts, and has not spread through the duct walls into the surrounding fatty breast tissue. Nearly all women with cancer at this stage can be cured. The best way to find DCIS early is with a mammogram.

There are also several other less common types of breast cancer. For more information about these other types, you can call our 800 number: 1-800-ACS-2345. Or visit our website at www.cancer.org.

Dr. Kemeny, what's the first thing you recommend a patient do after they get a breast cancer diagnosis?

**Dr. Kemeny:** When you find out that you have cancer, it is very important to determine how far along it is, or its stage. The stage is based on the results of the physical exam, the biopsy and other tests the doctor may have ordered. Breast cancer staging can be complex, but it helps you and your doctor decide about your surgery and your treatment. Be sure to ask your doctor to explain your stage in a way you understand, so you can decide what treatment options are best for you.

Dealing with a breast cancer diagnosis is highly personal. There is no right or wrong way to do it, and the questions and concerns you have six days after diagnosis will probably be very different from the ones you will have six months later. Dealing with, and adapting to the uncertainty after diagnosis is one of the most challenging parts of the cancer experience.

**Narrator:** Now let's hear from some breast cancer survivors, and their experiences with the cancer diagnosis. First we'll hear from Doreen.

**Doreen:** I was diagnosed with breast cancer 13 years ago. I was 42 years old. I was staged at stage zero for breast cancer, and my diagnosis was multi-focal intraductal carcinoma. Originally, something was red-flagged on a routine mammogram, and the radiologist suggested that I see a surgeon. The surgeon conducted a biopsy, and I was then asked to come to her office.

My husband and I went in, and she gave me the diagnosis of the multi-focal intraductal breast cancer. She was extremely compassionate and sensitive giving the diagnosis, yet she was thorough and explained everything on a level that we could understand.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I felt shocked -- extremely shocked -- and I felt like I was hit by a Mack truck. I didn't understand a lot of it, but the doctor was very sensitive and very clear. I asked a lot of questions, but 13 years ago, I didn't have a lot of information, and I wasn't aware of a lot of questions to ask, as women are now.

When the diagnosis was explained to me, the surgeon was extremely clear. She explained everything on a level that I could understand. It was just difficult to digest.

When I was diagnosed, we left the office and my husband and I discussed how we were going to tell our
children, who at the time were 14 and eight. We felt that we needed to be honest with them, because if
we told other people and didn't tell them, the secrets in the house always get out. So we decided that we
were going to be honest with family and friends.

I think times were different then, but I think some families would probably react to getting the news of a
loved one getting breast cancer in similar ways. They were very surprised. I was young. Again, breast
cancer was not in my family, so people weren't really talking about it in my family. But people were very
compassionate and very interested in how I was going to handle this, and offered to help in any way they
could.

My children -- I have two daughters -- when we told them about the breast cancer diagnosis, handled it in
two separate ways, probably because of their age. The 14-year-old was very concerned, a little
embarrassed because it was breast cancer, and when I asked her if she would feel more comfortable if I
had cancer of the finger, she said yes. The younger one, her only concern was when was I going to be
out of the hospital, and when was I going to be home.

Narrator: Here's Dana's recollection of that experience.

Dana: I was first diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 30 years old. My mother had just passed
away from lung cancer from smoking, and just a few weeks before that, my sister had been diagnosed
with breast cancer. I decided that maybe it was time for me to maybe get a checkup, and unfortunately
when I did, I realized that I had a small tumor as well.

I had been going for regular checkups since I was about 25 years old, since I had a condition known as
fibrocystic breasts. My father also happened to be a radiologist. When I was 30, I had received another
mammogram which came back OK, and I had asked my father, as long as I was in his office, could we
just do an ultrasound and see if anything else would come up? After reviewing the ultrasound, it turned
out that there was a mass on there that was somewhat irregular, and my father indicated that we would
have to take a further look at it.

The type of breast cancer that I had was an invasive breast cancer, and I believe it was considered stage
one. I had a 0.8 centimeter lesion in my right breast.

Narrator: Suzanne had this memory of learning about her diagnosis.

Suzanne: I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the fall of 2004, right after Thanksgiving. I was 41 years
old when I was diagnosed. Once I got all my results in, I was stage two breast cancer.

I had my regularly scheduled OB exam coming up, and I had found a lump myself. When I went in, she
looked at it, she gave me a clinical breast exam, and found another lump. At that time, she asked me,
"When is your next mammogram scheduled for?" I said about three months later, and I said to her,
"Should I move it up?" She said, "Just for the peace of mind, move it up."

So I called my doctor, my radiologist, told them I had a lump. They got me in the next day. When I went
in, they did an extensive, extensive mammogram. I also had a breast sonogram that day. She said,
"There's definitely something there on your films. I want you to go for a needle biopsy."

Did the biopsy, and then called me... I don't know, in the next day or two, and said that one of the tumors
was malignant. And one, he said, wasn't. But he suggested a lumpectomy: removing both, and also doing
a sentinel node biopsy to see if the cancer had spread.

Dana: The way I found out about my diagnosis of breast cancer was through a biopsy that was done by
my breast surgeon at Memorial Sloane Kettering. When I had first received a mammogram and
ultrasound at my father's office, I noticed that my father had started sweating a little bit. But when I asked
him what was wrong, he indicated, "Oh nothing, everything's fine. This looks just like a fibroadenoma. But
I think we should cut it out, because it's a little irregular, and just confirm that."
So I know my father very well, and I knew that he was probably hiding something, but I went along with it. I did have the biopsy, and my surgeon indicated to me that it was a very small cancer. She was very gentle and very reassuring, and said that we'll take care of it.

My diagnosis wasn't difficult to understand from a medical perspective. I had grown up with my father as a radiologist, so I was very familiar and had heard the word "cancer" a lot. But from an emotional standpoint, it was mind-boggling to me. I couldn't believe that I had cancer. I was 30 years old, I was single, I was living in the city, I had just started a new job. My mom had just passed away, and my sister had been diagnosed. It seemed like a bad movie, and I just couldn't believe that another bad event was happening to me and to my family.

My sister talked to me about her diagnosis. We are very close, and our mother, as I mentioned, had passed away only a few weeks earlier from lung cancer. She had had a nine year battle with lung cancer and brain cancer. We believe that when she had a recurrence in her lung, my mother went very quickly, and we think she did that because she knew that there were problems lurking for us.

So my sister had gone and received a checkup, and had found out that it was breast cancer, and I basically said to my sister, "Well, what do you think about this?" I asked her to feel my lump and see what she thought, and she said she didn't like it, and we should get it checked out right away. So we were very open about it, and a little scared just because of the news we had received about my sister.

Narrator: Now let's hear from Lorraine about her experience.

Lorraine: I was diagnosed with breast cancer in October, 2000. I was 49 years old at the time. The time of breast cancer I had was calcifications. I was diagnosed through calcifications. I didn't have a lump, I had like spread, little things spread around my breast. It was at the early stages. I was very lucky that it was at a stage 1.

I was given my diagnosis actually through mammography. I had gone for mammography and the doctor that I had gone to looked at the mammography on the premises. And, he came back and he said to me, "I have good news and I have bad news." He said the bad news is, that I would suggest that you go to a surgeon, because I see something that might be cancerous. The good news is.

Is that it's at such an early stage that this is the best time to find it.

He really explained it to me very well. And, I understood it was after, after it selved I felt overwhelmed. But, at that moment, when he was telling me, I definitely understood exactly what he was saying. He put it in quite simple terms for me.

Emotionally, I was overwhelmed. My body started to raise, I called my husband. Of course, I couldn't believe it. My mind was racing. You just don't think it's going to happen to you. And then, when it does, it just feels like, you know, you think, cancer, oh, it's like you're going to die, you know.

Then I of course tried to get an appointment, tried to find the best breast surgeon that I could find. And I basically set out to just try to focus on seeing what I have to do next.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I told immediately, my immediate family and my closest friends. And, then, yes, I did tell other people but it took me a while only because I noticed every time I talked about it I would cry.

So, it was almost like, you just kept not believing that it was you. That's basically what happened. Once I become more comfortable with it, then it was easier for me.

I think a lot of people who have never experienced it, or had family members who have had it, have a
difficult time, they really don't know what to say. That's OK. But, the support that I had was overwhelming. So, it was good. It was great, really. I have a good family.

**WoNarrator:** After I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I told a lot of my close friends, and a few co-workers, since I had just started my job. The reaction was pretty uniform. Everybody was absolutely shocked that this could be happening. With everything that had gone on with my mother just passing away, and my sister just being diagnosed, people just couldn't believe it. But every one I told, of my close friends, was very supportive and was very sure that we were going to get through this and we were going to do what we had to do to get through it.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I think my family was in shock, that two sisters, three weeks apart, could be diagnosed. My father was absolutely beside himself. Having been a radiologist his whole life, and now, having diagnosed both of his daughters within a few week period. Everybody was surprised, but everybody was supportive. And my father was an absolute rock, an absolute source of strength and never wavered that we were going to get through this and take care of this.

**Narrator:** Now let's hear Marilyn's story about her diagnosis.

Marilyn: I was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 42, the first time and at age 43 the second time. The type was intraductal carcinoma. Both times it was stage 1. I was doing breast self exam and I felt a lump. I made an appointment with my doctor. We decided I needed a mammogram. The mammogram revealed abnormal clustering of microcalcification. That meant I needed a biopsy. In other words, that was unusual and they had to check it further.

I was sent by my doctor to the surgeon, and when the surgeon discussed my options, he decided we would do a biopsy. But, in 1984, the biopsy was done, you would be under anaesthesia, the biopsy would be checked by frozen section, you would still be under anaesthesia and if the cells were positive, if they found breast cancer, you would have the mastectomy while you were under anaesthesia.

So, it was one step. You had the biopsy, and then you had the mastectomy done. And that's how I was diagnosed. They don't do that anymore. In 1984, they were still doing mastectomies that way. They were not doing it as a two-step biopsy and then wait, talk to the patient.

So, I just wanted to get back to my children, I had young children at the time. It was a difficult time, but with support I got through it.

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**Narrator:** However you get through your cancer experience, your strongest allies may be other women, like the ones whose stories you've just heard. Hearing a variety of viewpoints from women who've recovered from breast cancer, hopefully will help you realize that what you're feeling is normal and can help you develop your own coping skills.

The American Cancer Society is here for you, too. We can answer questions about your diagnosis. We have a variety of support programs to assist you, including Reach to Recovery, our program that can connect you with a local survivor. To learn more about programs available in your area, call us 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 1-800-ACS-2345. That's 1-800-ACS-2345. Or visit www.cancer.org.

Stay tuned for part two of this episode to find out how our breast cancer survivor's shared their diagnosis with their loved ones. They'll also share the very different reactions and displays of support from friends and family that followed. We know that hearing the words "you have breast cancer" can be a frightening and isolating experience. We hope these episodes will be a guiding hand, leading you to answers during this critical time. And, rest assured, we're here for you and you're never alone. Thanks for listening, and take good care.

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