



## Surviving Losses from Cancer

By Jan Borgman

Cancer—one of the few words in our language that can cause people to freeze in their tracks. The diagnosis of cancer changes one's life forever. Cancer is something that happens to others but not to *us*. While great strides have been made in treating cancer, too many people continue to die from the disease. Each year nearly 1.4 million new cases of cancer are diagnosed in the United States. And it is estimated that 600,000 Americans will die from cancer this year, or 1,500 cancer deaths per day in the United States alone (American Cancer Society, 2004).

*Mary's family changed forever the day she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. Mary, her husband Bob and their three teenage children needed to hold out hope. There have been so many breakthroughs in the treatment of cancer they could only hope that Mary's advanced cancer would respond to one of the new medications. Their lives became consumed by her illness.*

When one person in the family is diagnosed with cancer, the entire family is diagnosed with cancer. The life of the family revolves around doctor appointments, treatments, blood counts, infections, tests and other cancer-related activities. Families of cancer patients do not deal with anticipated grief due to the need to remain hopeful.

Many individuals or families who are grieving the death of a loved one from cancer find that their grief may be minimized by others who feel that "they should have known" that their loved one was going to die. Most cancers do not take a life quickly but most families will deal with the cancer over a course of months, if not years. In our quick-fix society, families dealing with cancer may be expected to deal with the anticipated death and "get over" the death of their loved one quicker.

*Like so many families whose lives are touched by cancer, Mary's family became her caregivers. Bob had to cut back his hours at work and their oldest daughter took a semester off from college to help care for her mom. As Mary's cancer progressed, the physical impact became more visible and the loss of self-image took its toll. Mary's body changed as she lost weight. Surgery altered her appearance. She experienced hair loss, fatigue, decreased appetite and incontinence during her treatments. With each loss Mary and her family had to grieve another change.*

The reality of most cancer-related deaths is that family members become caregivers to the cancer patient. Since cancer treatments can strip a person of their energy, the roles of family members often change. The cancer patient may have to take a leave from work or quit a job, impacting the family financially. They may no longer be able to manage the house or yard or be able to participate in childcare. Members of the family may have to change their lives in order to pick up added duties within the family.

*For the past 10 months, Mary's family cared for her at home. Her cancer did not respond to the treatments. Her family watched her struggle with the pain and disappointments. With each passing day the family experienced another change, another loss. Mary died at home with her family at her bedside. Her children grieved the things their mom would not be a part of—graduation from high school, college, marriage, birth of their children. Bob and Mary planned to retire when the kids were out of school and travel to Europe and across the United States. Now their dreams have ended and Bob wonders how he will survive the death of his wife, and best friend.*

Recent studies indicate that the stress of caring for a seriously sick family member at home often inflicts harm on the physical and mental health of the caregiver. Eighty percent of home care for the sick is provided by family caregivers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). Among the problems described by caregivers are depression, sleeplessness, a sense of isolation, family tensions, and grief over shattered dreams.

In dealing with the death of a loved one from cancer, it is important to look at the secondary losses experienced by the bereaved. The death takes away the role of confidant, supporter, lover, friend, security, future, dreams, etc. Even the role of caregiver may end or change as roles are redefined. The secondary losses will be experienced over a lifetime as reminders of the death resurface.

An anonymous poem called “What Cancer Can Not Do” states “Cancer cannot: cripple love, shatter hope, corrode faith, destroy hope, suppress memories, kill friendships, silence courage, invade the soul, steal eternal life or conquer the spirit.” I like to encourage cancer survivors that cancer cannot:

- **Cripple love.** Hold the memories of your loved one close to your heart. Your loved one will continue to live on in you.
- **Shatter hope.** Even though your loved one died, their spirit and their love will help you through your grief.
- **Corrode faith.** Some find comfort and strength through their faith while others may question their faith and feel angry. It is okay to find comfort through faith *and* to be angry. Having something beyond yourself can help refocus your feelings.
- **Suppress memories.** If you had not loved someone so deeply, you would not be grieving. Memories of better times can help you feel their love.
- **Kill friendships.** It is important to allow others to help during your grief. True friends will be there even in the midst of pain and despair.

- **Silence courage.** It takes a lot of courage to grieve the death of a loved one. It will be the hardest thing you will ever face.
- **Invade the soul.** While life as you have known it has changed forever, your loved ones will remain in your heart. Who you are has been impacted by their love.
- **Steal eternal life.** Love is eternal. As you learn to redefine your life, your loved ones will remain a part of who you are. They will be a part of your new life.
- **Conquer the spirit.** Initially, your spirit may be shattered by the death of a loved one but as you reinvest yourself in life, you will come to recognize how resilient your spirit is, and their spirit will help you find a way to get through the pain of grief.

The first three letters of cancer are c-a-n. It is important to remember when dealing with the impact of cancer that survivors **can** get through the grief, **can** keep the memory of loved ones alive, and **can** find new life. Just as a cancer diagnosis redefines life for the cancer patient and their loved ones, a death from cancer can do the same for those left behind.

### **References**

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