

Example responses

Name:

Rachael Lonergan

Age:

48

Occupation:

Founder of CanDo!

Location:

Sydney, Australia

What kind of cancer or other illness were you diagnosed with?:

Triple negative breast cancer, stage 2B, Grade 3

Month/Year of diagnosis:

December 2008

Your living situation at that time :

Single, in a brand new apartment with a brand new mortgage

Your occupation at that time:

Head of Strategy at a media agency (advertising placement).

What sort of surgery/treatment did you have or are you having?:

I had two lumpectomies, 6 rounds of chemo (FEC-T) and 30 doses of radiotherapy

What kind of problems or side effects did you experience during treatment?:

Unfortunately, loads! I tended towards the bad end of side effects. I was very nauseous most of the time during chemo and the steroids they gave me to counteract the worst side effects made me gain a lot of weight and get very moody. Roid rage is real! I had trouble sleeping and would often be up in the middle of the night, painting my apartment (by the end of treatment I'd painted every wall a different colour!). I would get hungry thanks to the steroids, but without tastebuds had no appetite so would eat a lot of what I call "filler foods" - not the healthiest diet. I also remember having a bout of oral thrush that was just awful.

During radiotherapy I was terribly fatigued and depressed. My skin became very burned over the weeks. Psychologically that was the most difficult time for me.

I also struggled with chemo brain. For about 2 years post treatment I was too exhausted to work full time, got very confused trying to follow conversations and lost about 20% of my vocabulary (eventually my words and focus came back!).

What did you need help with at that time, that you weren't necessarily expecting?

I had my lymph nodes removed under one arm and I hadn't realised that I wouldn't be able to do simple physical things like change the sheets, or carry groceries. I wasn't supposed to pick up anything heavier than 3 kilos. During chemo I really struggled with food. The constant low-lying nausea made it difficult to want to cook, and my appetite was all over the place. It was a challenge to get to the shops to buy fresh, healthy food so I often fell into the trap of getting food delivered that was not the best choice.

I also found being in treatment quite isolating. Often people wouldn't be sure if I was able to have visitors or go out or how to talk to me about what was happening. At other times the contact was overwhelming (e.g. getting home from chemo and 20 well-meaning friends would call to ask how it went). I'm a good communicator generally, but this was really difficult to manage.

Who helped you when you were in treatment? Did you get all the help you needed? Was it easy to ask for help?:

In all honestly I didn't get the help I needed because I found it very difficult to accept my circumstances although people offered help all the time. I would tell everyone I was ok, but that's just a polite response. I paid for cleaners and a gardener and food to be delivered rather than accept the offers from friends. I know better now!

What was one thing that someone did for you that you remember, or really stands out?

I remember getting a box of fancy magazines and beauty samples out of the blue from someone I knew who worked at a fashion magazine. It was so lovely because it was nice to be reminded of beautiful, feminine things when I didn't feel either beautiful or feminine at the time! It was a really thoughtful and lovely gift. I also remember my friend's mum arriving on my doorstep and without taking no for an answer she came in and cleaned my apartment from top to bottom while my friend and I drank tea. I was too sick to argue and frankly, there'd have been no point!

What would you tell someone about to go into treatment for a serious illness like yours? What do you wish you'd known or someone had told you? Any advice?:

Make sure you're comfortable with your doctors. You'll very likely have a relationship with them for 10 years or more, so it'll be miserable if you don't like seeing them. And don't feel pressured into treatments until you understand all the implications of your choices...even 5 or 10 years down the track. Don't be scared to ask for a second or third opinion. And if you're not getting the answers you need, contact a patient support group to help you navigate the system. The journey of cancer treatment can leave you feeling somewhat disempowered but it doesn't have to be that way.

What tip would you give someone who wants to help someone in a similar situation to your experience?:

Be kind and persistent. Offer to pick them up and take them out for coffee sometimes (sitting in your house with visitors gets really boring after months of the same thing!). Small things like going for an easy walk in the sun, or putting away the laundry, or helping to organise insurance paperwork can all be massively helpful to someone going through treatment.

How are you now?:

9 years cancer free! I think about the possibilities of recurrence sometimes, and I have weak upper body strength thanks to surgery, but that doesn't stop me from practicing yoga (badly!) and feeling grateful that I can use this experience to help others