

Emerging from the darkness

By Mary Billiter

The sunshine warmed and awakened my skin, brightening my disposition. Soothing sounds of birds chirping and neighbors going about their morning business enveloped me. I inhaled the morning air, no longer feeling cooped up.

I was less than a week post-operative from an abdominal hysterectomy that was part of my breast cancer treatment plan. Still, it was the third surgery in seven months since my diagnosis. To add to it, during surgery my gynecologist discovered that my bladder was attached to my cervix, so I was in the operating room longer than expected. The doctor prescribed a six-week recovery. I wanted to feel 100 percent now. Without warning, darkness and isolation clouded my judgment.

I was clearly not in the right frame of mind emotionally or physically to read or respond to anything other than the jokes on the back of a cereal box. Yet less than a week post-op, I opened a business-related email on my phone that unknowingly seized hold of my loneliness, pain and desperation and spiraled it into blackness I had never known until I felt a hopelessness I didn't know existed.

I had placed my last hopes in this project, so when it was rejected, the loss was monumental. In my fractured mindset, I had a broken body that continually hurt and betrayed me. Now, with nothing to look forward to, the future seemed desolate. I thought of my children, but the darkness was stronger. There seemed no way out. My life would always be a series of tests, surgeries and medications that only prolonged the pain. To feel hopeless is its own death.

My husband, Ron, left to pick up groceries. I was home alone, and I knew exactly how to end the emptiness. It flashed across my mind and saddened me. So with my dog beside me, I picked up my cell phone and texted my sister, Suzanne. I had texted her the day before and hadn't reached her. This time she replied immediately. And instead of doing what I usually do, which is shade the truth about how I really feel, I was honest.

I wrote about the darkness, the specific thoughts about ending it all and how alone I felt — even

though I was surrounded by love. She wrote back that the physical pain would pass and that it was not a good time for me to make any decisions. My sister doesn't talk about God a lot, but she knows I do. She wrote that God wanted me to rest and heal. She wished she had the power to take away the despair and darkness but assured me my soul was still bright, white and whole.

She continued to text, staying on the phone with me as I slowly regained my footing out of the hole. I went for a walk because I knew if stayed alone at my house I wasn't safe. When I had walked farther than I should, reaching our local park, I texted my husband. Within minutes, he bridged the distance to the park on foot. I called my doctor's office when we got home.

According to the American Cancer Society, cancer diagnosis may trigger common emotions of fear, anxiety, sadness, confusion and feelings of depression and helplessness. The group adds that when pain is severe, these emotions are exacerbated and may lead to despair, and life may not seem worth living.

Despite having three previous cesarean births, the pain following the abdominal hysterectomy was

severe.

"With a C-section a baby was removed, not your uterus, ovaries and cervix," my doctor explained. "Your body has to have time to adjust."

I hadn't allowed my body or myself time to adjust. I wanted my life back, and when I couldn't bounce back right away like I had after giving birth, I was crushed. Cancer, it felt, had defeated me one more time.

Cancer is a traumatic event. And as I discovered, depression can hit from out of nowhere. My symptoms began to lessen as the pain decreased. I also met with someone to discuss the hopelessness, grieve the losses cancer has brought to my life and move forward knowing that one day at a time, I'll start to feel more like myself.

If you suspect you may be depressed, make time to get the help and support you need.



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