

## A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE FROM THE DAUGHTER OF A PATIENT

A few months after my sixteenth birthday, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. That was a long time ago; I'm about to turn twenty-three. This account is based upon my memories of the year that my mom had her treatments. Memories change over time; every time we bring up an event from our memory files, the event we remembered is transformed. The past six years of introspection since my mother's diagnosis have coloured my memories of her fight with cancer. Some parts are more vivid than others. Yet, I try here to provide a picture of how I felt at the time and how those events transformed my family and me.

It was in the middle of February. I came home from school in the late afternoon. I knew that my mom had to spend the day in the hospital to check a lump in her breast. I didn't make much of it at first. I don't recall thinking that it might be anything more than just a lump.

I didn't know then that my mom and dad already knew that it was cancer, but they thought best to wait until my mom had finished her surgery before telling me. When I came home that night, my mom was already recovering in bed and my dad was in the kitchen with a close family friend. They told me what the diagnosis was. I remember staring at some flowers in a pot on the kitchen counter. I don't remember feeling anything—only numbness. Nor do I remember a single thought going through my mind. My mind and body were numb. It all felt surreal, almost as though it was not happening.

I had promised some neighbours that I

would baby-sit their children that night, so I went over to their house. This gave me a reason to escape from the reality at home.

The pace of my life for the next six months had been set. To be fair, I was already having trouble at school and was starting to hang out with the "wrong crowd". As a result, things at home were tense to begin with. A cancer diagnosis will not make other problems go away. In our case, it made them worse. I did not know how to patch things up with my parents. I wanted to reach out, but I felt too far away from my family, so far removed that I did not even know where or how to begin making things better.

I did not have the maturity to understand what my mom's diagnosis meant. Understanding the medical side of a diagnosis is relatively easy. However, understanding the human side of a diagnosis is much different. Adults struggle with the human side of cancer. They are at a loss for words, not knowing how to behave. For a teenager, the struggle is even greater. I did not have the capacity to even begin to comprehend what my mom was going through. I had neither the skills nor the maturity to enable me to deal with my mom's illness.

And so, I withdrew. I began spending most of my time at school, but not getting much work done during the day. When I was at home, I would sit in my room pretending to be busy. I didn't know how to help out, so I didn't. I didn't know how to give emotional support; how to just "be there" when my mom needed me. I was

scared and felt alone.

By the summer, things had gotten pretty much out of hand. My parents decided to send me abroad for a month to study. This was the best decision they could have made. It gave them some time to focus on my mom's recovery and it gave me the chance to take a step back and evaluate the situation from a different viewpoint. Being away for some time helped me to put things into perspective. During that period, I grew up. I learned the skills that enabled me to cope with difficult times. I had finally found the words that I had been looking for since my mom's diagnosis. I also matured in other areas of my life and I discovered who my real friends were.

I truly believe that I would have continued down the wrong path had my mom's fight with cancer not brought me back to reality. As strange as it sounds, my mother's illness ultimately helped to restore our family harmony. As a teenager, learning how to cope was the most important step for me in helping my mom through her recovery.

My lack of reaction to my mom's diagnosis, as well as my failure to provide support to her throughout her treatments, should never be viewed as a lack of caring on my part. I did care—tremendously. I was desperate to reach out and help her but didn't know how. But once I learned how to cope, I was able to reach out and support my mother in every way I could.

Today my mom is doing great. To quote her directly, "I plan on staying that way for a long, long time."

— Anonymous

### The apple does not fall far from the tree

A patient who had been having severe reactions to her chemotherapy treatment came into the office to share her story with us.

A few days earlier, when she arrived at her apartment building, not feeling well, a young man whom she had never met, approached her and asked how she was feeling. He seemed so genuinely concerned, she told him of her health problems and how discouraged she was with her condition. He, in turn, shared the story of his mother who, over the past 20 years, had suffered many medical setbacks but whose work with Hope &

Cope, from its inception, had brought her deep satisfaction. He then offered his help by doing some shopping and giving her a hand in any way she needed.

Meeting this young man, a stranger, at such a difficult time in her life, gave her new hope and the courage to go on.

Listening to this story, the Hope & Cope staff realized that this kind and considerate young man was none other than the son of one of our long time volunteers!

— Hinda Goodman