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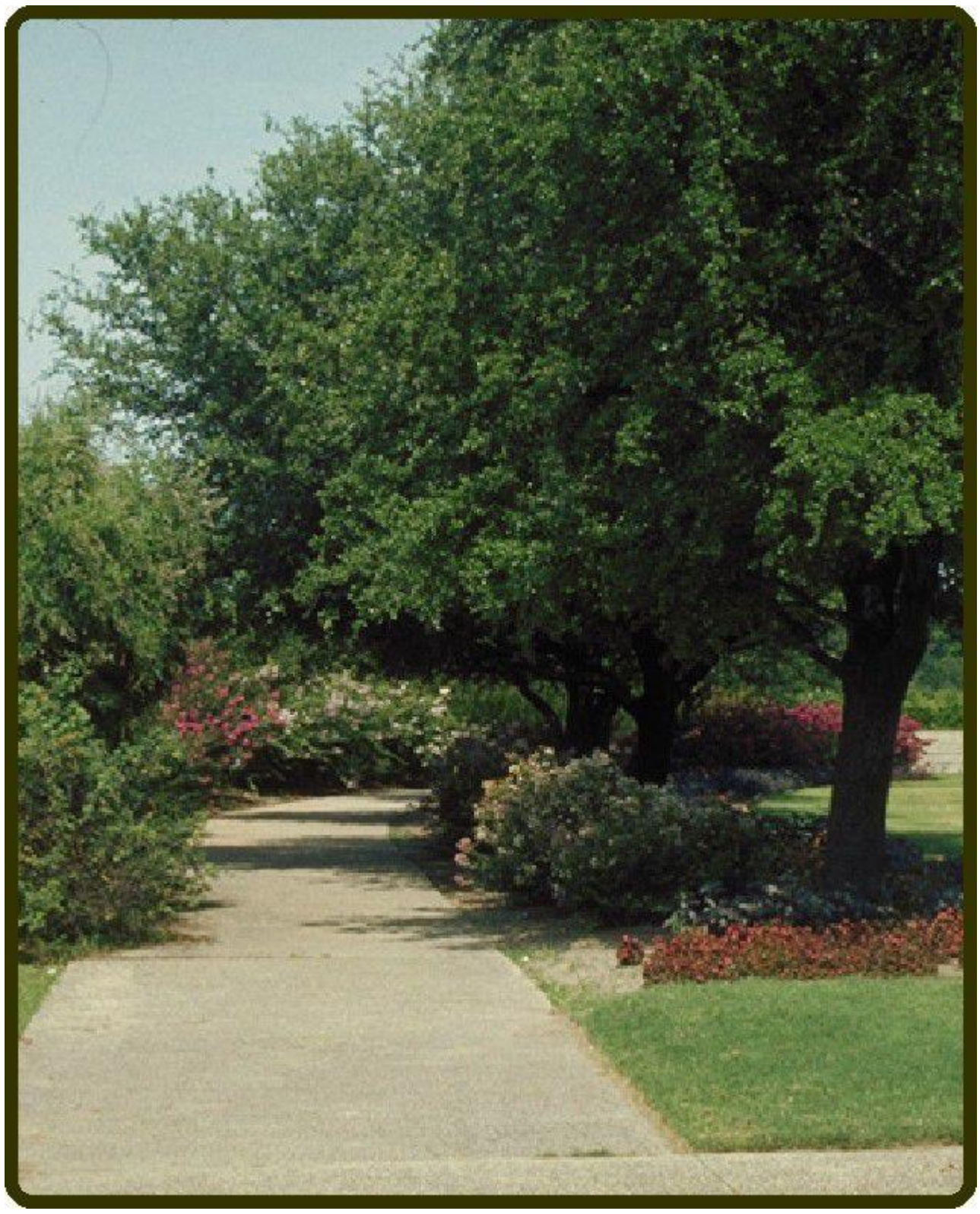
7 things every breast cancer patient knows



Illustrations by Julia Breckenreid

Chances are, you've either known someone who's had breast cancer, or will. That's because about 1 in 8 women in the U.S. will develop an invasive form of it over the course of their lifetime. With that in mind, we asked breast cancer survivors to share intimate, hard-earned wisdom gleaned from their personal journeys. Here's what they told us:

1. Your breasts don't define your femininity.

Darryle Pollack of Los Angeles got her diagnosis in 1995, when she was 45.

"I spent my first anniversary with my second husband in a luxury hotel where we planned to celebrate," Pollack said. "Only we didn't plan on me losing my breast a few days earlier or having post-surgical drains coming out of my breast. Fortunately, he claimed he was a leg man. And he's proved it in the 20 years since.

"Not long after, I removed my other breast as a preventive measure and had reconstruction, but my body rejected the implants. After that, I wore fakes for years but gave them up when I realized they didn't reflect the authentic me inside.

"Today, even without breasts, I feel more satisfied and happier as a woman than ever."

2. Friends need to stop saying, "Just get rid of them."

Lori Kreitman of Plano was 47 when she learned she had breast cancer in 2011. Before her diagnosis, she thought everyone with breast cancer should have a mastectomy so there's no worry about a recurrence.

When faced with making her own treatment decisions, she learned the truth: Removing breasts is not a guarantee the cancer won't return. "I realized what a truly personal decision this is," Kreitman said.

Ronna Benjamin of Newton, Mass., couldn't agree more. Diagnosed this year, at age 56, she was surprised by how many people told her to "just" remove her breast. She quickly discovered there are no "justs" in the process — there are risks, complications and details many are

unaware of, including that after a mastectomy, there's no feeling in the breast. If the breast is removed from collarbone to rib, there is also no nipple or areola. Any options to replicate them, including tattooing, will not bring the feeling back.

"They say to 'just take it off,' but my breasts are part of my sexual being and part of sex for me," Benjamin said. "When someone tells you what you should do, it's just wrong."

3. If you want to know the truth about treatment, ask a survivor.

Physicians may be reluctant to bring up potential complications from treatment — including phantom pain, infections, swelling, scarring, thickening of the skin and more. But by not mentioning that they can occur, it can be frightening if and when they do — and can lead to emotional decision-making.

Joy Brown of Mason City, Iowa, was 44 when she learned in 2002 that she had a fast-growing cancer and had to make quick choices about her treatment. Her plastic surgeon, the only one in her small town at the time, showed her post-surgical pictures of "perfect" breasts he'd operated on and said she'd still look the same after hers. That sounded good, but it wasn't true.

"You don't look or feel the same," Brown said. "Talk to survivors and to breast cancer advocates about the realities" — even when time is of the essence. Today, there are many online resources to help you find them.

4. Breast cancer in men is not talked about enough.

According to breastcancer.org, a man's lifetime risk of breast cancer is 1 in 1,000. "I didn't even know to look," said the Rev. Michael Enette of Dallas, diagnosed in 2004 at age 45. Once he learned of his cancer, Enette was hesitant to share the news.

"I'm a man and thought it would be embarrassing to tell someone," he said.

In 2006, while Enette was dressed in a pink suit and attending the Joanie Hatcher Memorial Survivor Symposium, women from Sisters Network congratulated him for being there to support his wife. When he told them he was the one with breast cancer, they were shocked, and took him in. Today, he serves as chaplain for their group.

5. You cry at the most unexpected times.

Diana Rowden of Dallas learned about her cancer in 1991 at age 38.

"About two years after my surgery, my husband and I were at a lovely dinner and having a lovely time, and I suddenly thought, 'Wow, I could have lost this,'" Rowden said.

She was overcome with emotion: "Everything was going great. It made no sense."

Across the table, Rowden saw her husband trying to understand.

"He reacted so sweetly and tenderly," she said. "I'm sure he was thinking, 'Oh my God, what happened? Did I say something wrong?'"

6. It's not over, even when it's over.

Pauline Daniel of Market Deeping, England, was diagnosed in 2014 at age 49.

"No one told me how hard ending cancer treatment would be," Daniel said. "Your life no longer revolves around oncology appointments and blood tests. After months and months of others controlling your health, you're told, 'Go and get on with your life.' People think that you're through the worst."

But for many survivors, Daniel said, it can be the loneliest time in the process. Especially since the question "Will the cancer return?" is never far from their thoughts.

For Martha Todd of Milton, Fla., the cancer did return, twice. She was originally diagnosed in 1996.

"When I had my first recurrence, I was told if it came back, there was only one treatment option left," Todd said. Twelve years later, "there were a plethora of options."

"I've learned to keep hope alive," she said.

7. It’s not just your body that will change.

The physical changes are obvious, the stress undeniable, but there is more. Claudia Schmidt of Clinton, N.J., was 52 when she discovered her cancer in 2010.

“I knew a life-threatening illness would be impactful, but it was one of the most intense times I’ve ever experienced,” she said. “There was more joy, more clarity, more fear ... the authenticity I felt — to have to be diagnosed with cancer to see that ... I didn’t expect it.”

For Pauline Daniel, the woman from England, “Things will never be the same for me again. I’ve been on a journey of self-awareness and learned much about myself — and it’s not all bad.”

And for Ronna Benjamin, who’s heading into surgery as this article goes to print, her guiding question, one that is echoed by many survivors, is “What do I want out of life?”

Cancer survivor Melissa T. Shultz is Dallas-area freelance writer whose first book will be published by Sourcebooks next year.