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Barbara's Ovarian Cancer Story Part 1

Barbara Ehlers-Mason, RN process in coping with her Ovarian Cancer diagnosis.

by Barbara Ehlers-Mason, RN

On October 30, 2004, I will mark an anniversary of sorts. On this date a year ago, my life changed dramatically. I remember small details like the doctor's matter-of-fact voice discussing major surgery, chemotherapy, losing my hair. I remember the "dear-in-the-headlights" look on my husband's face, a look probably mirrored in my own face. I remember the day was beautiful, warm and sunny. I don't remember much of my drive back out to work or exactly how I told my co-workers that I scheduled for surgery in approximately three weeks for what was, almost certainly, advanced ovarian cancer. I've been asked to share some of the things that I found and did that helped me on this journey that began almost a year ago.

My first reaction was probably pretty standard - DENIAL- "This can't be happening to me. I'm healthy. I eat right. I exercise." Then came -ANGER. I had just had a complete physical with my doctor (which included the OB-Gyn exam) on August 28th. I had been complaining to her for months about bloating, increased waist size, and fullness. But she had assured me that everything was fine and that my exam was normal. (How could she have missed a tumor the size of my fist?) -FEAR followed anger. I have never had surgery. Chemotherapy? A nightmare! I don't want to be sick. I don't want to lose my hair! What about work, my family, my LIFE?

Fear can be a great motivator. It motivated me to learn as much as I could about ovarian cancer, the surgery, the chemotherapy protocols and the newest treatments and clinical studies. Surgery was scheduled for November 24th, two days before Thanksgiving. In the three weeks prior to surgery, I organized my work load in my department in preparation for being gone for 6-8 weeks. I spent hours gleaning information from the internet and library. I turned to friends and family for support and positive energy through prayer and visualization. With the help of my husband and a very dear friend, Sabrina, I started preparing for the surgery. We made pre and post operative tapes for stress relief (anxiety control), relaxation, pain relief, and healing. I practiced visualizing an uneventful, no complications, very successful surgery with minimal post-op discomfort and rapid recovery. My daily meditations included messages of self-healing and images of my powerful immune system already fighting and destroying the cancer cells. I continued to exercise and, in fact, went to my favorite exercise class the day before surgery. Exercise has played a very important part in my recovery from surgery and chemo. I went into surgery feeling stronger, mentally and physically, almost as if I'd been preparing for a marathon. In addition to increased exercise that included walking, step class, and weight training, I increased my vitamin intake to boost my immune system and energy levels. And just like an athlete preparing for an event, I endeavored to prepare myself emotionally and spiritually. "I feel myself strong,



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healthy and completely cancer free, now and forever," became, and still is, my mantra. I gathered all the good wishes and positive healing energy from friends and family like a cloak around me. I worked very hard at controlling my fears about the surgery, chemo and my future instead of letting the fears control me!

The morning of November 24th dawned clear and cold. Six AM found John and I on our way to UCSF to check in for surgery. I remember feeling somewhat disconnected to what was happening, surrounded by a sense of unreality. "I should be getting ready for work and shopping for Thanksgiving and decorating the house." Instead, we are speeding toward a big unknown. I practiced some "grounding" and "centering" techniques that Sabrina had taught me and kept deep breathing whenever the "nervous butterflies" fluttered around inside of me.

Checking in went smoothly. In my meeting with the anesthesiologist, I requested that he follow a script I had written up for him to use while talking to me during the surgery. The script had messages like: "Everything is going smoothly, Barbara," you'll wake up feeling minimal discomfort," You'll have a speedy recovery and no complication." He agreed to my request and I was off to surgery.

The next few days are a blur, as I was in and out of sedation and on pain medication. A few memories do stand out- many, many beautiful flowers being delivered, gentle hands and voices taking care of and reassuring me; the faces of my loved ones looking stunned and scared. I must have appeared pretty scary with tubes and IV's everywhere! All seemed to be progressing smoothly until three days before my discharge. I was alert and moving around my room, sitting in the chair, and walking the hallways. And I experienced my worst day! Up until that time and for what seemed like for weeks, I'd been consciously putting on a good, strong, positive front. My theory was that the more positive energy would be reflected back to me in the form of: "It wasn't cancer, but just a benign cyst. Well, it is cancer, but we caught it early. The surgery will go great, and I'll recover quickly. I'll get back to my regular life!" That day started with a visit from my surgeon. She said I had had Stage IIIc ovarian cancer and she did not know if there was lymph node involvement. She was waiting for the report. She said a discharge nurse would be by to discuss chemo, wound care and at home follow-up. In her exam, the doctor found that my left leg was very swollen and she was sending me to have a CT Scan to rule out a blood clot. Also, my wound was infected in one area. She removed a few staples and started me on IV antibiotics. The staple removal procedure was very painful and I cried. Getting in and out of the wheelchair and up and down off the table for the CT scan was painful and I cried. Looking down at my 13 inch abdominal wound which was stapled except for a 3 inch open area and seeing my swollen to "twice it's size" left leg made me cry. And then there was the visit with the discharge nurse. A nice lady with a friendly smile as she spoke about chemo protocols that I'd be starting in three weeks, all of which would cause loss of hair, eyelashes and eyebrows. I cried. I felt so compromised, so vulnerable and SO ANGRY! Picture an armful of IV's shaking a fist at the sky. Looking back, I think finally getting angry and crying was good for me. After all, this wasn't fair, I didn't deserve this and the whole thing was overwhelming!



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The next day was a little brighter. I went back to listening to my tapes, practicing my meditation and using the techniques that Sabrina and John had taught me for pain and stress relief. The CT scan was negative. No blood clots. My body was just redistributing fluids. I increased my walks around the halls and the swelling started to dissipate. The pathology report showed, to the surgeon's surprise, that there was no lymph node involvement! I felt like I had gotten an A+. And, after 10 days of hospitalization, I was going home.

That first breath of fresh air was heaven! San Francisco was at it's prettiest-clear blue sky, warm sun on my face and a cool breeze caressing my cheeks and tousling my hair. My brother carefully loaded me and my pillow into his car and I was, thankfully, on my way home.

My husband, sister Nance and my mom welcomed me with a clean house, lots of tasty treats and loving arms. My sister, Laurie, would arrive in a few days. The house would be decorated for Christmas and I was preparing to embark on phase 2, recovery from surgery and starting chemotherapy.

The second part of the story will be published in a future newsletter. It describes the chemotherapy, finding clinical studies, complimentary approaches to beating ovarian cancer that have been work for Barbara.

Ovarian Cancer: a not so silent killer

Ovarian cancer has long been considered difficult to detect with vague symptoms that look like other conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and PMS. I had been experiencing bloating, gas, fullness, and urinary tract problems for several months. I complained to my doctor. She suggested dietary changes but never did any follow up testing on me. A simple blood test called CA-125 would have alerted her to the problem before it had advanced to Stage III. An elevated CA-125 (above 35) is indicative of ovarian cancer, especially in conjunction with the other symptoms I had. New research points to a clear sign of the disease: the presence of three specific symptoms simultaneously- increased waist size, bloating or gas, and the urgent need to urinate. Since my diagnosis, several friends and my sister have requested that their doctors do a baseline CA-125, especially, if they had symptoms of gas or bloating. Fortunately, they are fine. I urge you to do research, get information and if you have any symptoms or concerns, talk to your doctor and be assertive about what you want.



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Vitamin and supplements that Barbara researched and used in her fight with ovarian cancer, Phase I.

The following is a list of vitamin and supplements that I took to prepare for surgery and to speed post-operative healing.

Vitamin A: 25,000 IU daily- numerous studies have shown the beneficial effects of Vit.A on healing after surgery.

Vitamin C: 2,000 mg per day- essential for collagen synthesis which is part of normal wound healing.

Zinc, magnesium, B Complex: wound healing

Vitamin E: speeds healing

Homeopathy:

Arnica montana 30x, 3-4 pellets twice per day on the day before surgery and also as soon before surgery as possible. Then take them as soon as possible in the recovery room. Take for 1 week following surgery. Arnica is very good at preventing ill effects from any kind of physical trauma. Refer to: Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing by Christine Northrup, MD for further information about these and other supplements. She also has a script example of four healing statements for the surgeon and anesthesiologist that I requested they say to me during my operation.

I also took Cat's Claw. I found information about this herb on the internet and started taking it as soon as I was diagnosed. I continue to take it daily. Cat's Claw is indigenous to the Amazon rainforest and other tropical areas of South and Central America. It has been used for over 2,000 years by indigenous peoples for a variety of conditions including wound healing, cancer, internal cleansing, and "normalizing" the body. It has been used in Europe and Peru since the early 1990's as an adjunctive treatment for cancer and AIDs as well as other diseases that target the immune system.

A good information website for further research: Raintree Nutrition-Tropical Plant Database.

I used the guided relaxations/visualizations CD's from the Stress Education Center-Dstress.com

1. #209 Stress Management for Pre and Post-op Survival
2. #208 Stress Management for Healing

Reference:

Health Update from SELF Magazine by Jennifer Nelson November, 2004

Ovarian cancer: a not-so-silent killer

"Early diagnosis is crucial. When disease is caught before it spreads, 80 percent of women will survive."