On This Day … First Oncologist Appointment

January 12, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

A year ago today was my first meeting with my oncologist at Sloan. Before that, on December 29, 2016, I had the meeting with my surgical team to go over the results of my pathology. It was overwhelming and although I already knew I had lymph node involvement (we were told as soon as I woke up from my mastectomy on December 16), it did not really compute, you know? I mean, I knew that meant I needed "chemotherapy" but I had not a clue what that meant at all.

Ah, ignorance really is bliss. I knew it was big and I knew it was something I had never ever envisioned myself doing … like, ever. I think, though, this is true of all of us no matter our family histories or our backgrounds, "risk factors" or lack thereof, etc. No one expects to be told they have cancer, and no one WANTS to get chemotherapy. No one.

I felt my oncologist's pain as she sat with us a year ago today for almost two hours (or more, maybe) going over all of the ins and outs of what chemotherapy I would be getting, why I was getting it and about the side effects and how to help/manage said side effects. She wrote everything down for me in amazing handwriting, filling pages of information for me. It was an amazing appointment and one that without the written notes she wrote down for me, none of it would have sunk in.

At this point, I was working full time as a teacher, I even went back to work early after my surgery to be back to "normal" as soon as possible. It was a relief to have the cancer out of my body and I knew deep down that this whole chemotherapy thing was going to stop me from being "normal" and I was scared shitless. I had no one really to commiserate with other than my angel, my sherpa, who Sloan connected me with who quite frankly saved my life with these tricks for treatment for chemo.

You see, chemotherapy breaks you down. It strips away your hair, your dignity, your brain, your ability to "do anything" so that your body can ironically heal. It is quite confusing and I know there are a lot of people who are pressured from family and friends to forgo chemo and instead to lick a unicorn but really, chemotherapy is one of the best tools out there to hopefully kill cancer cells.

When I began chemo a week after my first meeting with my oncologist, I was prepared and yet totally unprepared. You see, no one knows how their body will respond to these drugs. As someone who rarely took an Advil, who didn't drink, who never took drugs, well, this was all

uncharted territory for me. (And yes, I know I'm a square … I don't even drink coffee … what a dweeb. I mean, if I knew I was going to spend the big 4-0 getting pumped full of all kinds of shit, I would have imbibed a hell of a lot more … or period lol).

I survived chemotherapy and I worked full time during it but I could not do much else. I was not able to care for my children, to cook, to clean, to really move beyond that school bell at 3pm when I went home from work and just became a vegetable.

It was hard as shit. I was told I would have support, that everyone would be there for me, but the thing about chemotherapy is that it strips you down to nothing. No matter who is "there" or not, you can barely notice. You are just functioning at the barest minimum. Still, I worked. I got up each morning, put on my wig, my lipstick and went to work. As a teacher, I was exposed to germs, the flu and more. Luckily, I did not run a fever during chemotherapy. I did learn how people can be nasty and heartless. I let it go here.

If you are here, at your first oncology meeting where I was a year ago today, you got this. Trust in your self, in your body. Do what you need in order to survive this process. God willing, you will never need to do it again ever. Remember, though, our sisters and brothers for whom chemotherapy is an endless routine to keep them alive. Pray for them. Pray for us, all of us, that a cure will be found. In the meantime, drink lots of water. Rest. Listen to your body and read and share my post about treatment tricks (link below). This is what I do in the time between …

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