

Breast Cancer Affects the Patient – and the Family

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Battling breast cancer is never easy. It can bring out the best in people when loved ones pull together, and it can also spotlight and magnify differences in personalities, coping skills and expectations.

Breast cancer survivors Amanda Jensen and her mom Mary Ann Rogers want others traveling the difficult road to recovery to know that everyone who is diagnosed with cancer, or who loves someone diagnosed with cancer, takes a different journey. "Cancer is devastating for everyone," Mary Ann said. "But people are individuals, and they act and react in their own individual ways. Amanda and I are great examples of how people in the same family can be very different."

For example, Mary Ann is a private person. "When I was diagnosed several years ago, it was intensely personal. I didn't want to share my feelings with the world," Mary Ann said. "Amanda was just the reverse, reaching out to her many friends."

"There's no way I could have made it through everything without my family and my girlfriends at John C. Lincoln's Breast Health and Research Center," Amanda said. "My girlfriends have a wicked sense of humor that kept me going — all the way to my final implants this spring."

The Breast Center staff make a proactive effort to reach out with a wide variety of support systems for patients, and also for their families, said Paulla Miller, Community Outreach and Patient Resource manager.

"Cancer doesn't just affect the patient, but all of those around them," Paulla said. "The family, the people we consider co-survivors, are why we have resources and books specifically for them. They're why we developed the Kids Coping Kits for children. Although patients are physically going through all of these surgeries and treatments, we are very sensitive to the fact that co-survivors walk right beside them, but may have different needs."

Amanda and her mom were not only different in their coping styles, but had different needs for their medical care. When it came to treatment, it was important to Mary Ann to limit surgery as much as possible. Her cancer was caught early, so she didn't need chemotherapy or radiation. Amanda, with support from her husband Jeff, just wanted to eliminate all possible risk with a double mastectomy. "How fast can I get rid of these things?" was Amanda's first thought. "My first reaction," Jeff said, "was to ask what we could do. I knew I would support whatever we needed to do to save Amanda's life."

It was then that family really helped, observed Amanda's sister, Terri Zumbrook, who flew with her husband to Phoenix to be with Amanda following her surgery. Amanda's husband Jeff cooked meals and their grade school daughter Grace – who was involved in almost every step of her mom's treatment and recovery – brought her mom popsicles.

Now, two years later, after 16 chemotherapy treatments, 34 radiation treatments and 10 surgeries, Amanda said, "by the grace of God, my family, and my friends, I am healthier, my husband and I are stronger than ever before, my relationship with my daughter is rich and the love from my family and the light I see in everyday miracles keeps me smiling."