



Ask the Survivor

By Clare Thomas

Clare was diagnosed with intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma, a bile duct cancer, in April 2014. After surgery and chemotherapy, she has been cancer free ever since. She and her husband are empty nesters in New York City but for a demanding though lovable 12-year-old Labrador.

Fear of a relapse is the issue nearly every cancer survivor deals with. I find I am flooded with euphoria after every clear scan. I make long-term plans — to take a trip or a course or start a new project. After a few weeks the feeling begins to fade and a little bit of fear creeps in. It might be a new twinge in my stomach that brings the angst back, or I might think about how the only person I have found who has the same cancer has relapsed. When this happens, I remind myself of strategies that seem to help.

How do you deal with post treatment anxiety?

I make it a point to stay off websites about cancer. The information is often incorrect or inflammatory. My doctors are smart and know the most about my cancer. They want me to stay healthy as much as I do.

Humor is an important element as an antidote to anxiety. If I am really anxious, I seek out funny books, TV shows, or movies. I often read the funny cards in a card store and laugh out loud. A good laugh helps to clear the mind.

What tools have you used to help cope when anxiety takes over?

Keeping busy is the most important action I can take. The busier I am, the less time I have to worry. Whether it's working for pay or volunteering, it is essential for me to get out of the house and see people on a regular basis. Volunteering for a nonprofit can be particularly rewarding and keeps me from focusing too much on myself. I volunteer in the Pediatric Department of MSK. Witnessing the strength and resolve in both the children and their parents is inspirational.

Exercise also clears my head and puts me in a good frame of mind. It is well documented that exercise or raising your heart rate significantly raises your mood and lessens anxiety. Taking a walk or hopping on a bike is one of my tools.

Have you sought professional help to treat your anxiety?

Although not everyone needs formal counseling, I have found that speaking to a professional therapist has been helpful in controlling my anxiety. A cancer diagnosis is a life-changing event — getting psychological advice does not mean you are weak or crazy. My therapist helps me distinguish what is a valid concern and should be brought to the attention of my doctor from what is anxiety-driven, coming mainly from my imagination. Talking to someone, even a good friend, can help me release some of the tension.

Has anxiety affected your relationships?

My cancer diagnosis and treatment has made my relationship with my husband much closer. He attends all of my appointments and is the second pair of ears. He is the calming influence.

My daughters may have suffered the most from my angst. After surgery I found myself correcting them more than usual. I was preparing for my job as a mother to end. The longer I go without a relapse, the more relaxed I am as a mother. (My daughters might disagree!)

Has anxiety affected your quality of life or prevented you from moving forward or accomplishing tasks?

If anything, the anxiety has spurred me on to clean out the closets, get organized, and do those things I put off. I always accomplish more with a deadline and I don't want my family or friends to have to deal with the junk I have accumulated! Before cancer I would tend to procrastinate and think, tomorrow, tomorrow. Now I know better.