

Interview Transcript: Amita

Amita is a wife and mother of two sons. At the time of her diagnosis, Amita worked in a sales office but she now works as a counsellor with Wellspring.

Type of Cancer: Breast Cancer

Age at Diagnosis: 45

Year of Diagnosis: 2005

Treatment: Mastectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and breast reconstruction

Date of Interview: January 2010

My name is Amita Kapil and I was 45 years old when I was first diagnosed with breast cancer. I had to have a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy and then radiation, then finally a year later I had my reconstructive surgery done.

Sharing the news

So rather than talking to everybody individually, we decided to just get everybody together and we did that at my sister-in-law's home, got everybody together there and just told them, basically, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was going to have a mastectomy, and that I really just needed everybody to be strong. I did tell them that I didn't want people to be moping around me, I didn't want pity, I didn't want anyone to be crying around me because at that time, I wasn't feeling that way myself and I didn't want to be in that kind of environment as well.

I think they were pretty stunned because while I was actually explaining this to them, I was smiling. It's like I'm telling them, "I just won the lottery, I'm going on vacation" or something. So I think that made it really difficult for them, so they didn't know how to handle me or how they're supposed to behave. I think if I broke down, that would have been helpful for them. They could have consoled me. But I didn't allow that. So I don't know if it was whether I was just trying to be tough for everybody else or maybe I was in denial. But I don't believe I was in denial. I think that was just my way of dealing with it because I knew I had a lot more to deal with yet, so I had to be strong and I didn't want to break down at this point, and that was it. So, about four weeks after that, I started my chemotherapy.

Losing my hair

The biggest thing was the hair loss. They hadn't actually explained to me how quickly I would lose my hair once the treatment started, and all I remember is I'd had, I think, my first treatment of the chemotherapy, then there was a break for three weeks and during that three weeks, I found that I was getting headaches and my roots were really painful and it felt like... my hair was really dry, and my mom used to come in in the mornings just to give me a massage and she used to massage my head, and I think after the fourth or fifth day I couldn't even bear for

her to touch my head, it was just bringing me to tears. And that was my hair getting ready to actually fall out and I thought, OK, I thought maybe it'll all just come out at once, but there were areas that had no hair and areas that did have hair, and so when I looked in the mirror, that was really distressing. And that's when it first hit me, I looked ill. So I just asked my son if he could just shave my hair off. So, you know, we had a laugh about it, they took some pictures, so we tried to joke around, sort of have some fun with it.

What if it happens again?

The tumour has been removed, I've had the mastectomy, there's no guarantee that it wouldn't or it can't reoccur, so I think that was the more frightening thing for me. When everything had finished, the fear that it could come back... when would it come back? And it was while I was going through my chemotherapy and my radiation, I was at that point where it was going on and on. When was it going to end? I just wanted it to finish.

And when it came to the end, it was surprising, I was surprised at my reaction. As much as I was looking forward to the treatment to end, because, you know, I just wanted to get back to my life—when it came to the end, I started to get a bit frightened now because, while I was going to the hospital, while something was happening, I knew that somebody was looking at me and I was being treated and I felt secure, and then now I had to go off the treatment and the treatment is coming to the end, now I was afraid because I'm on my own, now I was questioning, well, what if it happens again, it could happen again, I didn't want it to happen. But I think as time goes on, those thoughts go to the back of your mind and then you start dealing with trying to get back to your normal life.

Be strong

I couldn't face going to the support group because I was just feeling so sort of uncomfortable and really groggy after the chemo, so I never had the opportunity to meet other people or talk to other women who had experienced the same thing and how they dealt with it. So in that respect I was very much on my own. There was nobody at home that could give me the advice, and all I would hear was just, "Be strong, just be strong," and it got to the point where I thought if one more person tells me to be strong I'm going just swipe at them, because you know you couldn't be any stronger than I had and I thought, how can they say that to me when they have no idea of what I've gone through and what I'm feeling inside.

Thinking of my husband

In a way, it wasn't until my treatment had finished and I think a year or so had gone by that I actually realized that maybe I had been too tough on my husband when I told him I just wanted him to be strong for me, and, you know, I didn't want to have to look after him but I think he may have read that, that he couldn't be emotional in front of me or show any feeling. And it wasn't until afterwards I realized, it must have been really hard for him. Because he is one who keeps his feelings to himself and I know he wouldn't have shared his thoughts with anybody else and that must have been really hard for him. I was needing support for myself but we tend to forget the caregiver—that they need support as well, because they're still trying to deal with their daily duties, going to work, looking after the patient or the family member and taking care of the children, yet they need that support and that's where I kind of felt really bad that he needed that help and he didn't get that.

Looking back

When I look back to the person that I was before I was diagnosed with cancer and to the person that I am now, I would say that I'm a lot stronger and I think my confidence has really—I've become more confident. I'm not afraid anymore. Like I'm not afraid to face my challenges. That's the big change in me. I'm... naturally I'm a shy person, or I was. And I still am to a certain extent, but I think I've opened up a lot more since I've gone through my cancer experience, so that's a positive change in me. So I think I will stand up more and speak up more where I may not have done before. So that is a very positive change in myself.