



LESSONS FROM A MASSAGE THERAPIST TURNED CANCER PATIENT

By Meaghan Mounce, BSc., RMT

I have been interested in helping cancer patients for a long time. Little did I know I would become one myself. It seems everyone has been touched by cancer. Here is my story.

At 36 years old, I was enjoying life with a one-year-old daughter, a wonderful husband and a busy and successful massage therapy career. During a self breast exam I discovered a lump. I had a mammogram, an ultrasound and an immediate biopsy (three actually) of my right breast. I knew that day that it was cancer. I was told I would be having surgery within a month.

My immediate reaction from being diagnosed with breast cancer at only 36-years-old was anger. I was very angry. My next thought was of my career and my finances. I was a self-employed Registered Massage Therapist in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. I did not have critical illness insurance, nor did I contribute to unemployment insurance. Any time off I needed would not have any income.

I met with my cancer surgeon quickly after my diagnosis. Because of my lifestyle, my career and my young daughter, we decided on a single radical mastectomy of right breast and lymph node removal. I would also have a tissue expander placed under my right pectoralis muscles to make space for a breast implant during breast reconstructive surgery. I was told I could not lift anything heavy for at least four weeks, meaning I could not carry my daughter, nor could I massage.

The surgery was successful, my right breast, nipple and several lymph

nodes were removed. I was determined to be back at work as soon as I was able. I diligently moved through range of motion exercises for my right shoulder and regained full range of motion four weeks after surgery. I went back to work. I picked up my daughter. I lifted weights at the gym.



Working on my range of movement

My breast cancer was estrogen and progesterone positive, meaning the cancer cells were fueled by these hormones. I began hormone treatment to decrease estrogen production and prevent estrogen from binding on its cell receptors. I was told I will be on this medication for the next ten years. I would not be having a second child.

With my right breast removed, I no longer wanted my left breast either. I had a hard time seeing the difference on my chest and I also wanted to further decrease the chance of having a breast cancer reoccurrence. I still had a lot of life left to live!

Four months after my first mastectomy, I had a prophylactic

mastectomy of my left breast. I no longer had breast tissue or nipples. I was left with scars and pectoralis muscles with tissue expanders beneath. Again, I was told I needed to take four weeks off work. Four weeks off lifting weights at the gym. Four weeks off lifting my daughter. Determined, I was back at work again four weeks after my second mastectomy.



After my second mastectomy

One year after my cancer diagnosis had breast reconstruction surgery. My perky pectorals were formed! I am now 38-years old and will remain on hormone blocking therapy for the next several years. I have learned some lessons during my cancer journey that I hope will help others when treating cancer patients and caregivers.

FIX TO SURVIVE

As a cancer patient you ride an adrenalin high from appointment to



appointment. From surgery to surgery. You wait for results. You tell your story over and over. The primary focus of cancer surgery, treatment and life after cancer is to cure the patient from disease and prevent or slow reoccurrence or metastasis. A team of health care professionals try to fix cancer patients to survive.

Once the surgeries and treatment end, the real healing begins. A cancer patient may no longer want to be 'fixed'. Massage therapy considerations should be based on the patient's goals. Certainly, some patients will want to work on regaining range of motion after surgery or decrease lymphedema or long-term side effects from radiation. Some patients may want to bring back body awareness and feel confident after life altering surgery. Many cancer patients have forgotten what it feels like to be touched in a safe, nurturing way.

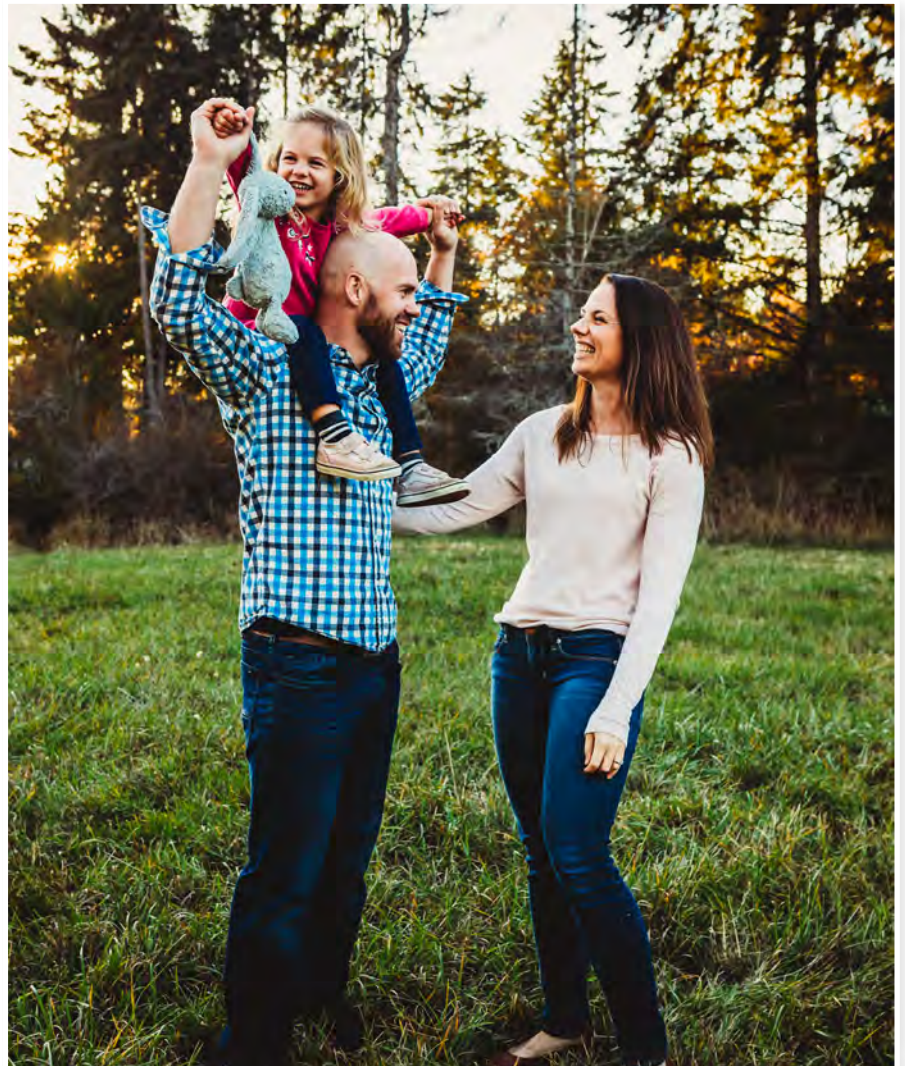
Most cancer patients will seek massage therapy treatment after active treatment has finished or during end-of-life care. Consider the patient's goals rather than their cancer diagnosis.

CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER

From the age of 10 until I was 20 years old, I watched my mom battle breast cancer. In the final stages of her life my Dad and I helped dress her and move her from chair to bed. We cooked the meals. We cleaned the house. Roles changed in our home.

Caregivers have a big ask. They must be a primary support system, both emotionally and physically. They take on more roles at home, while potentially having to be the primary income earner. Often caregivers do not make time for themselves. Offer caregivers a safe space to relax or share their frustrations, grief and anger.

Through life experience my goal is to educate other massage therapists to feel confident in providing a safe space for cancer patients and caregivers. Today, I am proud of my journey and my body and I hope that sharing my story helps others.



Loving life with my family

AUTHOR BIO

Meaghan Mounce is a Registered Massage Therapist and fitness instructor in British Columbia, Canada. She holds a Bachelor Science with a major in Biology and has completed several continuing education courses in Oncology Massage.

Meaghan is passionate about strength training, movement and the outdoors. You can find her in the gym or outdoors hiking, biking or paddle boarding with her husband and four-year-old daughter. Meaghan is a breast cancer survivor and advocate and shares her story to raise awareness for breast cancer in women under 40.

