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BATTLING BREAST CANCER

Monday, October 2, 2000

By TRACY CONNOR



INNER TURMOIL: Elizabeth Kallen, with husband Edward, responded to her diagnosis at age 40 by trying to shelter her family. "I was afraid. I would cry in the bathroom. I would cry in the car," she says.

Photo by: Steven Hitsch

THERE are few experiences more unifying than a diagnosis of breast cancer - in an instant, thirtysomethings and golden-agers alike find themselves facing the same terrible fear.

"The basic concern for everybody at any age is death - and that's something that never leaves, no matter how old you are," says Lee Miller, a founding member of the support group SHARE and a 25-year breast-cancer survivor.

But within that common ground, diagnosed women at different stages of life have distinctly different reactions, concerns and experiences.

Below, survivors from the metropolitan area talk about how age colored their battle with breast cancer.

20s

That's what Asha Mevlana thought when doctors found her breast cancer.

"When you're 24, you feel kind of immortal, invincible," the Manhattanite says, 10 months after being diagnosed.

"When they tell you that you have breast cancer at that age, you

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don't believe it. And then it completely changes your perspective on everything."

Roberta Levy Schwartz knows exactly what Mevlana means. She was 27 when her cancer was discovered three years ago - and even the medical professionals had a hard time believing it.

"I would be in waiting rooms, and the nurse or the doctor would come out and see me and immediately turn to my mother. They assumed she was the patient," says Schwartz, who works at Mount Sinai Medical School.

For women in their 20s, this confrontation with death comes just as they're starting to carve out a life for themselves.

"My immediate reaction was, 'I'm a kid,'" Schwartz says. "In your 20s, you're dating and you're going to bars and hanging out, and you have your first job, and you're trying to figure out what you're going to be ... you don't have breast cancer."

But she did - and when the initial shock wore off, her thoughts turned to how she was going to live her life after a mastectomy.

"One of the first things on my mind was, 'Oh my God, how am I going to date with one breast?'" says Schwartz, who met her future husband not long after the surgery.

Mevlana, who had chemotherapy after a lumpectomy, remembers a similar dread.

"At 24, you're in prime dating age and it's scary to think, 'I'm going to be bald.' You don't want people to feel bad for you ... and it affects a lot of people's image of themselves."

A strong support network helps women of any age get through diagnosis, treatment and recovery - but it's not always there for twentysomethings, whose concerns rarely include death.

"A lot of people my age have trouble. They're not really open about it and they isolate themselves," Mevlana says.

Schwartz reached out, and many of her friends were sources of strength, but others didn't rise to the occasion.

"Some of them literally couldn't handle it," she says. "There are people simply I don't talk to anymore."

30s

For women in their 30s, the effect of cancer treatment on fertility can be the most acute issue.

"I never thought I wanted kids, but when someone said to me I might not have the option, it was a whole different story," says Lisa Frank, 38, a Manhattan lawyer who discovered a tumor

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during a self-exam two years ago.

When Manhattan resident Debra Schatz, who now designs breast-cancer-awareness jewelry and accessories, was diagnosed at the age of 39 in 1986, her thoughts immediately turned to children.

"I was already having this little mini-breakdown because I was turning 40 and I wasn't married - and I was wondering, 'Where's the husband, where's the kids?'"

With cancer treatment on the horizon, the question quickly became not when she would have a family but if she would have one.

"After my treatment, I must have called 20 different hospitals to see if there were any studies about getting pregnant after early-stage breast cancer. And the thing I found astounding was back then there was no study," she says.

Career can be as pressing a priority as children for women in their 30s - and breast cancer can pose just as big a threat.

Randi Rosenberg, 35, of Jersey City, remembers how she had been promoted at the American Management Association just before her breast cancer was found.

"Besides the initial panic of, 'Am I going to die?' there was another internal panic: 'How am I going to manage this great responsibility that has fallen into my lap and take time for my surgery and chemo and these things that, quite frankly, are getting in my way?'" she says.

"One of the things I remember so clearly was how many hours I was spending in doctors offices with people trying to save my life and thinking, 'Excuse me, but I have a meeting to get to.'"

Rosenberg's obsession with work helped get her through cancer because it "deflected" paralyzing fears. Later, surviving cancer prompted her to leave the rat race and become an entrepreneur.

"It really gave me a perspective I so desperately needed. It made me realize that chasing the ambition wasn't the most important thing, and that I needed to refocus," she says.

40s - and beyond

For women in their 40s, family often is the primary focus.

"My kids were young - my oldest was 13," says Elizabeth Kallen, a fund-raiser who was diagnosed in 1986 at age 40.

"I was afraid I would die and I wouldn't see my kids grow up. I wasn't going to be there when they graduated. I wasn't going to

be at their wedding. And as a mother, not to be there is devastating."

Kallen, who lives in New City in Rockland County, found herself working to keep her family together - wondering how cancer would affect her marriage, and trying to insulate her children.

"I had to hold it all inside because I was afraid they would be afraid. I would cry in the bathroom. I would cry in the car," she says.

Family concerns even influenced Jo'Ann Selkirk's treatment decisions. She rejected precautionary chemotherapy after doctors removed her tumor in a partial mastectomy 11 years ago at age 42.

"I felt I had such a responsibility to them that I took a risk ... I didn't want them to see me bald and sick," says the New Rochelle mother of two. "There was a lot of pretend going on."

Kallen says telling friends she had breast cancer at her age was also a daunting task. A 25-year-old is an anomaly; a 40-year-old is a walking reminder.

"I was a runner and a vegetarian, so my friends were blown away when I told them. Their reaction was, 'You're doing everything right and it happened to you.' They were petrified."

Breast cancer may be on the minds of many women who passed the big 4-oh mark because they've started getting annual mammograms - but it can be just as unthinkable.

"I was thinking that by the time I was in my 40s, things were going to get easier," Selkirk said. "I was established in a home. I was established in a relationship, and just when you're starting to enjoy it, you have it coming to an abrupt end."

But that settled-down feeling can also be an advantage for older women, says Odette Petersen, who had a lumpectomy, radiation and tamoxifen treatments after she was diagnosed nine years ago at age 49.

"My life was in order. My kids were out of the house, we had moved into the city and my relationship was solid. So I was unconflicted in terms of having to juggle other responsibilities," she says.

"Making the decisions was unobstructed by other concerns, which really makes it easier. Going for radiation every day wasn't difficult for me."

But many post-menopausal women face other hurdles; they may not be as physically resilient as younger women as they

confront many taxing months of surgery, chemo and drug therapy.

And breast cancer can also come at a psychologically fragile time.

"A lot of women who go through menopause get very depressed and think their lives are ended - and then they have this," says Carole Hecht Chamberlin, 64, a Manhattan public-relations executive and 11-year survivor.

"It's like the reverse of the cherry on top of the whipped cream."

The realization that fear of a recurrence of cancer will be with them through their golden years can be a bitter pill for post-menopausal survivors to swallow.

But for Chamberlin - like millions of women of all ages - their pride and relief in still being around to worry about it makes the medicine go down a little easier.

"I go for my mammogram once a year. I go in at 9 o'clock in the morning, and when I walk out of there I'm smiling," she says. "I just say, 'Thank you, man upstairs, for another year.'"

These are the Web sites of two New York City groups for women with breast cancer:

* *Young Survival Coalition, www.youngsurvival.org*

* *SHARE: Self-Help for Women with Breast or Ovarian Cancer, www.sharecancersupport.org*

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