



Interview Transcript: John

John works as a financial advisor. He is married, and is a father and grandfather.

Type of Cancer: non Hodgkins lymphoma (stage 3)

Age at Diagnosis: 46

Year of Diagnosis: 1987

Treatment: Chemotherapy

Date of Interview: June 2009

My name is John and I'm a cancer survivor from 23 years ago, when I discovered a lump at the base of my neck and ultimately was diagnosed with Stage 3 nonHodgkin's lymphoma, quite an aggressive form of the disease. And it scared the heck out of me. This meant, in the old days, not a very good life expectancy. But the paradox was that it was like a brush fire: if we could put enough water on it, we had a chance of putting it out, and that's what we did.

Reactions

On diagnosis, and when you get the news, you actually feel visibly shorter. I know the meaning of the word "crushed" from this experience because I felt inches shorter in stature. Telling people about it was difficult because it was new territory for everybody. I always thought of myself as being a healthy type, living a healthy lifestyle. I'm sure there were some reasons why I got sick but I don't understand them fully even today, although I've tried. Telling people was difficult, especially my mother. I got the worst reaction from my mother of all people, who said it was the worst news she had ever heard. And although I tried to reassure her, I think she was pretty frightened.

Day--to-day changes

The support I got from Valerie, my wife, was crucial, and also from my good friends, some of whom were so positive, it just really said, "You know, it's just like an ingrown toenail: not a problem. You'll beat this." And I can tell you it was a big problem to me.

Valerie and I decided we would split up some of the stressful things in life, with her getting more of them and me getting fewer of them. One of the things was driving to work in the morning. We both worked downtown at that point and driving downtown from where we live takes you right by a very large cemetery, and Valerie did the driving on the way down and I always turned my eyes the other way when we'd go by the cemetery because I could visualize myself being there in about 12 months. So that was difficult. One little thing we changed was I didn't look at cemeteries.

Expectations

I did not have the experience I thought I was going to have. In most respects, I felt better most

of the time than I thought I was going to feel. It did not bother me much at all to lose the hair because I knew it would come back. As a matter of fact, not only did it come back, it came back curly, wavy. It was really quite... I liked it. I'm sorry it didn't last. But the other things, I guess the mouth sores from chemotherapy that were aggravating, foods tasted different, everything tasted different, water wasn't attractive at all. Forget about wine or alcoholic beverages of any kind, they were like drinking battery acid. Milk was about the only thing I really felt tasted the same. Bland foods generally were fine; anything with any spice or flavour was off the list.

On the other hand, it amazed me how quickly I felt better after stopping chemo. It didn't take more than a few weeks before I felt very much better, and within two or three months I think I was pretty well back to normal and getting good news on my regular visits to the oncologist.

If the phone rings...

If I got a phone call today from someone who was newly diagnosed, I think I would reassure them by telling them that the treatments today are much better, first of all, than they were 23 years ago. I think the success ratio in most diagnoses is much better than it used to be. I would encourage them to contact the people at Wellspring. I would encourage them to learn about how to use their own mind power to promote health. I would refer them to some books. I would encourage them to talk about this with other people and other survivors.

Reflections

Coming out of this, I learned a lot. I learned a lot about myself, I learned a lot about health. I learned, I think, a lot about the power of the human mind to help. I learned that not all of my habits were healthy ones; I'm still working with some of them. Stress is something that we all have to contend with—the only people who don't have any stress anymore are in Mount Pleasant Cemetery. So stress is a sign of life. If you're alive you have stress. Controlling it or at least coping with it, dealing with it, is a key, I think, to maintaining good health. Especially for cancer survivors, to give themselves a better chance of longterm survival, I think dealing with stress is very important. Making changes that reduce stress is key.