

A wrench in my plans

I was 18 when I found out that my mom had breast cancer. It was May, right before my final exams. I actually found out at the same time my mom did.

Jen's story

My dad and I were at the doctor's appointment with her. At that point, they had found a mass; she had a biopsy and a lumpectomy. Now, we were there awaiting the pathology results. The doctor said it was a cancerous tumor. I remember sitting there, thinking this didn't sound good at all. He continued, saying he believed it to be a very aggressive, invasive type of cancer. My mom was going to have to make some major decisions regarding treatment, one of which would be a mastectomy, followed by chemo and radiation.

I remember sitting in the exam room, trying not to have a reaction. I didn't want to upset or scare my mom. I became stoic in my attempt to protect her. After the appointment, I overheard the doctor ask my parents if I was okay. He was concerned I hadn't shown any emotion and wanted them to watch out for me. I was just trying not to focus on my negative feelings because I felt my mom needed my strength.

When we went home, I knew that my parents needed time on their own, with the news and all the serious decisions that needed to be made. So, I grabbed my bike and just started pedaling. I didn't even know where I was going. Eventually, I decided I needed to talk, so I rode over to a friend's house. I needed my own support, but I didn't want to rely on my parents with everything else they had to think about.

I had planned to go travel and attend university in Europe, right after I graduated. However, I began to think that it would be hard on my parents, since I was the last kid at home and they might need some help. I was also worried about being so far away if things went badly, so I decided to stay home. I thought my mom would need my support. I had already been concerned for her and had been waking up at night, getting her water when I heard her coughing.

My friend wasn't home, so I kept biking to a college in town, thinking that maybe I could go there in the fall. I ran into a professor there, who I knew and he sensed something was wrong. I told him about my mom's cancer and asked if I could get an application to apply for the college. He refused to give me an application, saying it wasn't the right time to making that kind of decision. He sat and talked with me awhile, saying I needed things to settle down before I started changing all my plans.

Once the shock of my mom's diagnosis wore off, the "realities" began to settle in. I started worrying my mom might not make it to my graduation, let alone my wedding, or to meet my future children... I tried to talk to people—mostly close friends—but kept a lot of it to myself. Some of my friends avoided me, because they didn't know what to say. I was aware that might be the reason why they weren't around, but that didn't ease my pain, loneliness or feelings of betrayal.

My dad was a teacher at my high school so, one day I stopped by to see him about another of my mom's test results. I wanted to talk more than I did, but could tell that the burden of this diagnosis was

weighing heavy on him. I kept a lot of my fears away from both my parents, because I felt like they had enough to deal with. I left to walk back to class and ran into a teacher, who commented about me wandering the hallways. I told her about mom's cancer tests and she felt so bad, she apologized and later bought me a teddy bear. It was interesting to see such support from unexpected sources.

My mom decided on a treatment path. She went with an aggressive strategy—a double mastectomy—due to the possibility of reoccurrence. When she had her surgeries, I would stay home with her since my dad was working. They didn't keep her in the hospital for very long, so I helped her when she got home.

There were a few special banquets for my graduation, but my parents weren't able to make it to any of them. I wanted to enjoy these celebrations, but it was hard without them there, and with all the reasons surrounding their absence.

My mom's mastectomy surgery was scheduled at the same time as one of my final exams. My teacher was kind, though, and let me take the exam at a later date, so that I could be at the hospital. No matter the schedule arrangements, it was still so hard writing these tests, with all that was going on. I still wanted to keep my grade point average up, but it was hard to concentrate on school.

I did end up going to that local college in the fall. I decided to stay in residence for one of the semesters, so I could still get that "away from home" college experience. However, that meant I had to get a medical exam for health clearance. I went to the only doctor I knew, our family GP, who had been the one to diagnose my mom. I remember him telling me about my cancer risks, due to my mom's illness, which frightened me.

Due to my mom's decision to be more surgically aggressive and have a double mastectomy, she didn't have to go through chemo and radiation. Luckily, the tumor that had looked very invasive, had wrapped around itself instead of spreading outwards. Her lymph nodes were clear and she was in remission! I am overjoyed to still have my mom with me. She remains cancer free to this day.

Through everything, I learned that it is important to talk about what is going on and know that there might be some people who will feel uncomfortable. Don't take that personally. It is not about you. Seek out people who can listen to what you are experiencing and offer you support.

Ultimately, your family is going through a really difficult time and stress levels might be very high. You might not be able to get all the attention that you need for your own journey if you don't seek support outside.

Also, try to remain as positive as you can without denying your feelings. Don't focus on the worst case scenario, because that probably won't happen. It won't be helpful to you dwell on your fears. Through everything, it was helpful for me to talk, exercise, go on bike rides and get my energy out. Journaling was helpful too, when I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts, but didn't want my thoughts to overwhelm me. It was important for me to try to do all the things I usually would do, even if I didn't always feel like it. These things helped me keep from worrying too much and still feeling like there were some things in life that felt normal.