

Moving Past Grief Helps Heal

GUEST COLUMN

Friday July 2nd, 2010



It was only when I was unpacking my hundredth box that it occurred to me that moving house is similar to having cancer.

It's a major upheaval in your life: a time when there are new challenges, new people and new environments to deal with.

For instance, when I heard the word cancer come out of my doctor's mouth I burst into tears, and then cried for another two months every time I thought about it. The same thing happened when my husband told me he wanted us to leave Los Alamos.

Both were life-changing events.

I wished both, at the time, weren't happening. And both were the start of a long grieving process.

With a cancer diagnosis, you are thrust into a totally unfamiliar world, new clinics, doctors you didn't even know existed and a world of chemicals you can't even pronounce.

In the same way, a new town has meant new people, new physicians and yes, even new chemicals. Trichloro-s-triazinetriene, and Hydroxyethylidane-1 to name but a few - just to keep my pool running!

With cancer I became an expert in blood chemistry, now I'm becoming an expert in water chemistry. So in the same way that I'm experiencing a new life in a different town, someone diagnosed with cancer is thrust into unfamiliar territory too.

The similarities continue after treatment.

You've been around for a while, you start to become a seasoned survivor of cancer, and you start to feel more comfortable with your new surroundings. You get recognized in the clinic, you meet friends at support groups, you know the medical terms that once used to be gobbledygook.

Now, in the same way, I'm waving to my new neighbors, not having to use the sun to navigate home, and learning how to pronounce all the new Native American names.

Your new life starts to feel familiar.

But the grieving process still has to go on. It's a cycle of denial, anger, depression and acceptance. The lucky ones go around once. Many of us go around several times.

Denial can work for a while but at some point you have to kick it out the door.

For me, it wasn't until I walked into the chemotherapy room for the first time that I finally had to admit I had cancer. When we moved, it wasn't until the removal truck backed up the driveway that I finally realized we really were leaving Los Alamos.

But denial is destructive. It puts the brakes on your grieving process, because to pretend that it never happened stops you from healing. Repression, on the other hand, can be a wonderful tool. It allows you some acceptance, whilst also allowing you to continue living with the sadness. I live, love, laugh now because I moved past denial. I walk around Richland with a smile on my face because I'm repressing the fact that I miss my friends terribly. It doesn't mean I don't, it just allows me to look forward rather than lock myself in the closet with a box of tissues.

After denial you live with anger and depression, two of the hardest parts. Was I angry with my husband for wanting us to move from the place I loved to a place that I thought I hated? Yes, but let's not tell him that. Luckily I was able to repress that anger!

After moving, was I depressed about leaving my friends, not being able to look out at the beautiful snow capped mountains, and not being able to get around the grocery store without several hugs? Definitely.

Did I get angry at my cancer, at life, for throwing me the cancer challenge, you betcha! Did I ask why, why, why should I be taken away from my family at such a young age? Yes. Did I feel so sad that at times I saw no future? Sure. I've been on the depression wagon and it's lousy.

With cancer, though, it's much trickier to get through the grieving process. I still grieve for not being the mom I want to be – the one that doesn't have to take naps, the one who doesn't lose her patience because she's so exhausted, the one who can race up and down the yard, play soccer or roller skate for hours on end. It does still cause me to get depressed at times, but that's because I'm still grieving, I'm still living with cancer as a chronic disease and, even though I know this is my new life, I'm still working at being happy with it.

But here's what cancer has taught me which makes my sadness over our move easier to deal with. Grief is inevitable and it's OK. It's the walk across the hallway that opens the door when the one behind you closes. No one should feel bad or ashamed over grief from cancer, or missing friends. What counts is making sure that you walk through the door you just opened, rather than hovering in the hallway. It's hard, it's very hard. But with one foot in front of the other, the ground will gradually feel more stable. The light on the other side will start to emerge.

Yes, I could have turned inward after my cancer, not ventured out, not valued every day. Sometimes I wanted to hover. Sometimes I did. I'm now feeling the same in my new town. I could glare at my husband (repression only works so long you know!), not explore and just sit fondly reminiscing about Los Alamos. Or instead, I could call back the neighbor who put herself out to bring us cookies, call the local senior's tap group and see if they'll adopt me like the Hilltappers did, or play tennis for as long as I can with my children.

Whether we've been diagnosed with cancer, or moved across the country, we have choices. Some people say that grieving allows us to forget the sadness. I'd rather say that grieving allows us to move on by forcing us to deal with the hurt and shows us what we should value the most. And if you take the steps, you can get back your smile. Maybe I don't see snow-capped mountains out of my window any more, but two mules and a hill are pretty beautiful, too.

Because when you can move past the grief, all you'll see is a brand new day and a future of possibilities.

Kay Kerbyson and her family recently moved to Richland, Wash. She is an Associate Member of the Los Alamos Council on Cancer and President/Founder of Ovarian Cancer Together! Inc. (New Mexico). Local support and resources for those touched by cancer can be found at www.losalamoscounciloncancer.org and at www.ovariancancertogether.org.