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CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Give me time to heal

The devastating after-effects of cancer treatment can last for years, says nursing student Kerry Stott

Next time you ask someone who has had a life-threatening illness if they are okay, consider your motive. Is it actually you who is seeking comfort from them? Is it you who needs to be reassured, rather than the person with the illness?

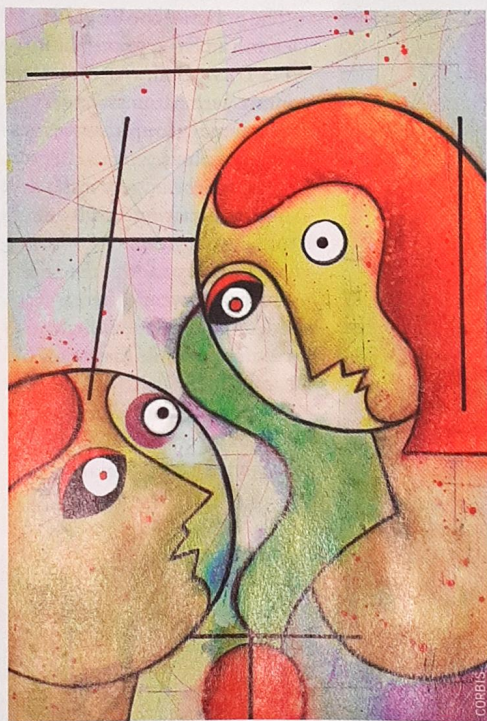
It all began last year when I was diagnosed with breast cancer and then endured ten months of gruelling treatment. I was particularly unwell, so I was relieved to reach the end of the scheduled course.

However, the end of the treatment was not the end of the ordeal. The chemotherapy and radiotherapy left me with a body that felt like a wrecked shell. I will continue to take medication for the next four years and need to attend regular check-ups. My GP said that it would take between two and five years just to recover from the effects of the chemotherapy.

Recently I returned to the GP to report fatigue, which turned out to be a heart murmur caused by the chemotherapy. I now no longer trust my body and fear it is letting me down.

Traumatic

I have been sliced and diced, filled full of chemicals, irradiated and now, after all that, told I am fit to get on with my life. Is it any wonder that, along with every other patient affected by cancer, I still have 'issues'?



Whenever a healthcare professional says 'you are okay now, aren't you?' I know it is a statement and never the question it appears to be. Other people want to be reassured that now my cancer is gone, there are no more unpleasant truths to face.

Healthcare professionals seem to think that because they have completed the technical aspects of their jobs, patients can resume their lives as though cancer was just an unfortunate interlude. Even my fellow nursing

students seem to need the same degree of reassurance from me that I thought I would be getting from them.

It is especially startling because it is clear that I will be living on a cusp for a long time, as I veer between feeling okay and suffering abject fear that my cancer has or will return.

All my physical and mental resources have been depleted – and this has affected me psychologically.

Surely healthcare professionals and colleagues can understand that I struggle with everyday tasks such as getting the children to school, paying household bills and re-adjusting to my new body image.

It should be obvious to others that I am fearful about the future in case I become ill again, and that I worry about the effects this could have on my family.

Lacking empathy

My desire to talk about my illness and fears is entirely human. Yet my experience as a student and as a patient suggests that nurses are not taught how to react to people like me. Consequently, my colleagues treat me in the same way as people who are not healthcare professionals – as though they are seeking reassurance from me.

Be aware that cancer and its effects cast a long shadow. People who have had this experience may be strong from surviving the experience yet still very vulnerable **NS**

Kerry Stott is a mental health nursing student at the University of Cumbria

STUDENT LIFE