



Interview Transcript: Renée

Before her diagnosis Renée worked in retail management. She is married and has two young children.

Location: Goulds, Newfoundland

Type of cancer: NonHodgkin's Follicular Lymphoma

Age at diagnosis: 32

Year of diagnosis: 2006, with a reoccurrence in 2007, 6 months after her last chemotherapy treatment

Treatment: Both times she had 6 months of chemotherapy

My name is Renée Bennett. I live in Goulds, Newfoundland. I was diagnosed with cancer when I was 32 and I was diagnosed with nonHodgkin's lymphoma, follicular lymphoma stage 4. The doctor said that it would probably come back but the fact that it came back within six months, they were shocked. They didn't expect that at all. So in the back of my mind, I knew that relapse was a reality for me but to that extent and that early, I had no, no idea. And so that journey really brought back my first diagnosis and my resistance to accept it all. It was all piled on emotionally in my relapse.

The first diagnosis

I worked right through it, completely right through it. The only time I had off was just over three weeks. Because when in hindsight, I looked back thinking, "I'm strong, I can get through anything and I'm not going to let this take over my life." So I continued my work because that was normal for me — and not a good idea. I shouldn't have done that but that's what I felt I needed to do and looking back, I relapsed.

Telling friends

When I relapsed that was probably... that was worse for me because then I limited who I told. I did. And then word of mouth went, "Renee's not well, she relapsed." I know little of the conversations that went on but I told... I took control of my first and I told a lot of people, but my second I didn't. I just told the immediate and then let everybody else do the work. Because the emotional accepting of my first diagnosis was coming on, the fact that I relapsed was coming on me, and how am I going to get the strength now? I got the strength in my first diagnosis and managed to pull through that well. "Where am I going to get the strength now?" That's the question I asked myself for a long time. "How am I possibly going to dig down now? Is there anything left?" So limiting who I told and what was going on with me was a little control since everything else was taken.

Telling the kids

My husband and I really sat down and bantered it back and forth because we didn't know how

much information to give them at such a young age. They were five and two when I was first diagnosed. We just said that Mommy was sick. Mommy wasn't feeling well and Mommy had to take medicine to make her feel well and at that age, it was OK. They would rub my hair and they would play with Mommy's feet and, "it's OK, Mommy." Such innocence, that you take care of your kids and in turn when you're not well, when I was on that path, they gave me back all the love that we have given them, so in that respect it was OK.

I never said in the first and second diagnosis and relapse that Mommy had cancer. But Grace had a friend in her class whose mom had cancer and so there was a connection, so telling her that Mommy and your friend's mom had... were sick and we needed special medicine, it was kind of like baby steps with her. Again Ryan was too young to really understand. But she knows that Mommy had cancer now and so does Ryan. And we've done events that allow them to know why we were doing the events — because Mommy had cancer — and accepting that. But concerned in their way that Mommy is going to get sick again, like I know that it's in the back of her head, more so for Grace. So we just felt that by telling them bit by bit, for us, that worked.

Leaving work

The second time I stopped work; I didn't go back to work. I knew that I had to take care of me. That was a lot of negotiating in my head. A lot of trying to say, "it's OK, Renée, because you had to take care of you." And I take care of a lot of people in my life. You know, my kids of course, my marriage, family, I do a lot of that, but when you have to focus on yourself, it's a whole different story and normal, yeah. That's so... it's very broad, but I haven't been back to work since 2007 and I... it took me about two years to accept that I have to heal for me. And it's OK to take care of myself and allow me to do the things that I need to do and self renewal, whether it be spiritually or physically.

But physically and mentally it took a long time to get on track, and debating whether I need to go back to work, and I realize that it's not a place I need to be because it was just too much. It was just too stressful and I realize that stress in my life is no good, so eliminating that and being happy today was a journey that I'm so glad that I have realized that, and I'm not so hard on myself anymore.

The cost of cancer

Financially I was on a great career path. I was enjoying my job even though stress was coming with it. And I was on a very good financial level and so was my husband, so we were on a great path and then I went on disability, shortterm disability for my first diagnosis, so everything was covered. But when it was my second diagnosis, I had left that job, left my benefits, went to another one, but I didn't know I was relapsing, so I had nothing and I decided not to go back to work, so then it was one income. It was very hard. My husband has his own business so there's not a lot of perks that come with that and no insurance.

Again, I didn't have to spend a lot of money on drugs but just living, because we have two kids, we just bought a house. So, it was very stressful with regards to that. Now, I am on disability right now so that is helping and my husband of course, he's doing better in his work, but it was tough. I really didn't know how we were going to pull through but you know, it's about being positive, it's about moving forward and finding things that work and what doesn't work, so that we had our struggles but came out on top.

Fear

My checkups were every three months and from the time I left the doctor's office to the weeks leading up to my next appointment I felt very anxious, and the closer it got to that appointment, it didn't do me very well at all, and I realized that I was very anxious because I relapsed. The recurrence was always in the back of my head and any ailment that — I feel I'm always checking for lumps, I'm always feeling my neck to see if anything is out of place. So I'm very aware of my body. I revisit that all the time but it's definitely getting better. I had... they found a spot on my lung in September. It turned out to be an infection that went away but the relapse, the fear of survivorship, was fullfledge. I really thought that it might have turned into something else. My mind was in overload, and when it turned out, "Renée, you're fine," so I wasted all that good energy, all that spiritual goodness, on something that was never there.

Finding support

I think connecting with those who are going through the exact same thing was the best path for me. There are many different cancers and all of my peers, there's some that have non Hodgkin's lymphoma but they don't have what I have. There isn't anybody that I know that had follicular lymphoma, but emotionally we're definitely there. We all understand and so that was really important for me because I learned from that, I learned from their journey and that helped me to move forward in what I need to do today. And it brings me where I am today, so opening up myself, opening up my independence and accepting new into my life was very important to me and having the support to move forward in that from my husband and my family was ideal.