

Interview Transcript: Gill

Gill is a writer and television personality. She is married with three young boys.

Type of Cancer: Breast

Age at Diagnosis: 42

Year of Diagnosis: 2009

Treatment: Mastectomy and Radiation Therapy

Date of Interview: August 2009

You hear a cancer diagnosis and you think, “Doom, gloom, bad news, bad story, could only have a bad ending,” and you can’t anticipate the beautiful things that happen along this path.

My name is Gill Deacon. I am 43 years old. Just before my 43rd birthday, I discovered a lump in my left breast, and just after my 43rd birthday I had a mastectomy. And I am now, four months later, one week away from finishing my five-week radiation treatment. And then I’ll have some hormone therapy and a few fine tinkering with some injections, but mostly I’ll be done.

Losing a breast

A few people had told me not to look at my scar until I was ready. And I had 24 staples in it, which is just... Just knowing that made me know I didn’t want to look. And then there was just a bandage there and I kept wondering, “When am I going to look?” And you’re showering and you’re trying not to look at the area because, just... I just didn’t want to spook myself. And one day I just, I was just actually walking out the back door of my house and I just looked down. I didn’t plan it, it wasn’t this big dramatic befriending of my scar, I just looked down and thought, “This is OK.” I touched it slowly and I sort of decided to love my body and be friends with my new situation, and then I just looked gradually more and more. Now I’m totally used to it, and my kids—I walk around just totally normal now. And it’s only been two or three months, so it’s amazing how quickly you can get used to something that you just never could have conceived of before.

Sharing the news

I’m a pretty openbook kind of person. I’m a talker. I tell people things. It was a no-brainer for me that I was going to tell people. I have a public life that I did not share this information with until now, but I told all my friends and acquaintances and I wanted everybody to be included in that information. I felt awful at the thought of somebody who knows me hearing that from someone else; having seen me and not had me tell them. So, I told people really candidly.

In a way, telling people is empowering. Telling your friends and your family with a degree of confidence that I chose to have was very empowering: to say that yes, this is happening. I'm in charge of it, I'm not scared of it, I'm not going to cower in the face of that C word. I'm going to say it, I'm going to own it, I'm going to rock it, I'm going to get through it. It was really important to me to not... not be afraid of it that way.

Telling my kids

The other thing that was really important to me about disclosing the information was to tell my kids. I couldn't go... I didn't last more than about three days without telling my kids. Everybody is different on that score, but for me, I wanted this to be an opportunity for us to experience something as a family and to see that we would rise to this challenge and we'd get through it. And I wanted them to be part of—in ageappropriate ways, wanted them to be part of the whole thing.

So at the time, my kids were, well, six, eight and 10, my three boys... So I had a couple of notes written down on a piece of paper and we, at the dinner table one night, said, "You know, we have something we really want to talk to you guys about." And never in my life as a parent have I had my children's undivided attention and silence like I had after I said the C word. Mommy has cancer—ugh. And my eightyearold said, "Is it the dying kind?" And I said, "No, it probably isn't. No, actually I should be fine." And he said, "OK." And he's pretty much fine since then. Which was such a funny shocker to me and it helped me realize that this doesn't have to be as big a thing for them as it is for me.

We anticipated having that basic conversation with all three of our kids and we also anticipated—and it turned out to be the case—that the older one, who was almost 11, would need a separate, much different, conversation, which we had. And he was much more sensitive and processed it in a whole different way, and so I was really glad to have that one onone time with him. We had one of the most meaningful, special, unforgettable conversations and moments of my life as his mother in that time. So it was very important to me to share that with him and to have him know that he could be part of this in whatever way he felt comfortable.

And then throughout the course of my treatment, they followed the twists and turns in the story: this is happening; oh, now this isn't happening. And, you know, Mom only has one breast now and this is what it looks like and this is what it feels like. It's just become part of their normal life.

My new body

The thing that I am finding the hardest to move on from is my sense of sexuality and being a beautiful sexy person who has one breast missing, [who] looks like a boy on the lefthand side. I think it's a lot of work to love yourself and your body when it's been so butchered, really. And it's a getting better and it's a work in progress and I think that probably women should give themselves a break on that front. That's what I'm trying to do. Just be OK with however long it takes to feel beautiful again or attractive again. And you know, I think it's a really common—of course it's a common issue and I would just say that for me, it's a slow climb. It does get better every day. But it's hard.

My mantra

Somebody said to me, “Don’t suffer future pain.” And you can certainly tie yourself in knots when you’ve been told you’ve got cancer, worrying about, “What if this happens? Will that hurt?” Duh, duh, duh. Right now, the birds are chirping and your kids are playing happily in the backyard or whatever the moment is; that’s all you have, really. Because a rock could fall on your house from outer space tomorrow. I mean, we really don’t... I never got forced to think that way until I got cancer and I really think it’s a great lesson to live by. To enjoy the moment. And there’s always something in your day that was great, whether it was a great phone conversation with a friend or a delicious meal, and being appreciative of those things when they happen is so... it’s just fuel for the tank.

And I find it very helpful when you’re doing an MRI or all kinds of tests that get done on you and you’re going into places you’ve never been before and these complicated machines and scary-looking situations, and it’s easy to get anxious and it’s a really helpful—to just be. I’m here and I feel OK and I’m taking deep breaths and I can concentrate on my breath and just be in the moment. And the moment is usually totally fine.

So I find that being in the moment mantra really helpful both in those scary hospital moments but also in the bigger picture, just enjoying today. Yeah, maybe I have a cancer that’s going to come back in six months and I will die. I don’t know. But I can’t worry about that because how would that help? So I can just appreciate that I feel good today and I’m going to have a nice dinner with my family and that’s good. And that’s all I have.

Epiphanies

A lot of people seem to have those postcancer awakenings or epiphanies where they think, “Oh my gosh, I’ve got to get all the toxic chemicals out of my house,” or “I’ve got to become vegan,” or “I’ve got to start doing yoga.” I kind of scratch my head because I’m doing those things already. So I’m not sure what my big epiphany will be from all this except maybe to be easier on myself. And just think I don’t have to be perfect and I don’t have to do it all and even if I do manage to do it all—whatever that is—it doesn’t inoculate me from the randomness of life. So there’s something about accepting that we just aren’t in control that’s very liberating.