

Sisters of Support

An On Target Resource for African Americans with Breast Cancer

by Carol Lloyd
Cincinnati Woman Magazine

True or false: thirty is too young to have breast cancer. Antoinette Barnett, thirty-one, knows the answer all too well. In July 1998, she found a lump on the side of her breast and brought it to her doctor's attention.

"I was sure it couldn't be cancer," she remembers. Besides her age, there was no history of breast cancer in the family, either. The doctors thought cancer unlikely, too - until the pathology report came back: "malignant."

As the reality sank in, she found herself caught up in a whirl of frightening words such as oncology, radiology, and lymph nodes. She also found herself waking in the middle of the night, crying and crying. Her partner of twelve years couldn't handle the situation and he took off, leaving Antoinette to explain to their small daughter why mommy's eyes were red.

Luckily, her family helped out. The youngest of seven children, Antoinette had siblings to accompany her to chemotherapy and radiation appointments, to sit with her and hold her hand.

"They were there when I needed them," Antoinette says of her family. "I didn't need anyone to cry because I was doing enough of that." Best of all, her lovely four-year-old, Samaya, offered tender loving care. When Antoinette's aunt came to change the bandages after surgery, Samaya gravely told the older woman, "Thank you for taking care of my mommy." Those Fridays after a chemo treatment, Antoinette would tell her daughter, "This is your weekend for taking care of mommy," which meant the most effective kind of care: snuggling quietly with her mother on the couch.

Major Discovery

Three months into her treatment, Antoinette made a major discovery: other African Americans had gone through some of the same trauma with breast cancer. She wasn't alone. Several of the women had relationships break up as a result of the cancer. These other women, Antoinette found, could help her deal with her situation. Even more startling, she could help them.

A call to social worker Pam Jenkins, minority outreach coordinator with Cancer Family Care, brought her even more good news. Pam had organized a group of women who offered one-on-one assistance to newly diagnosed African

American breast cancer patients. Called the "Sisters of Support," these survivors had learned how to offer friendly help and information to women who needed it.

Pam established Sisters of Support for those women through the years who had told her they'd rather not participate in a group, but who brightened considerably after speaking one-on-one with someone who knew first-hand what they were going through.

She was looking for volunteers with good attitudes who were willing to learn what was appropriate and inappropriate to say, how to listen, and how to share personal experiences with another person. Antoinette met the criteria and, after training several months later, was matched with several women who had had similar experiences. Pam makes the initial visit with the newly diagnosed patients and then identifies the best volunteer for her. The pool of volunteer "Sisters" is large enough that Pam can match the pairs on a variety of factors, including type of surgery (lumpectomy vs. mastectomy), side of the body, and type of treatment (radiation, chemotherapy, tamoxifen, or other).

The volunteer then arranges to meet that woman, bringing along a resource folder containing information about support groups, dealing with children and using stress reduction techniques such as tai chi and yoga. In addition, she also carries a "TLC basket" which includes a candle, various lotions, bath salts and a journal. The message, says Pam, is "You are important. Take care of yourself."

Changing Health Care Attitudes

That's something that too many women, especially African American women, don't do, Pam asserts. She notes that many people in this community still don't trust physicians. Past injustice and poor treatment by some in the medical profession have left lingering negative impressions.

That helps to explain why fewer African American women get mammograms than white women. When they finally do get help, a tumor that might have been small and localized could have had time to spread.

Some African Americans are reluctant to discuss their problems with others, Pam says. "It goes back to what many of us learned at home - that when you have problems, you don't take them outside of the home. We're slowly changing our thoughts about health and the health care community."

To find out more about Sisters of Support, call Cancer Family Care, 731-3346.

Another wonderful resource for African Americans with breast cancer is Patterns, Inc., a support group that meets monthly. Evelyn Brown Jones is president of the group and Brenda Brown (no relation) is secretary. For more information, call Patterns at 231-0426.

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