

Finding my new 'normal': A journey of self-discovery

By Fay Field

I was thinking about what sort of things I would talk about in relation to the title of this piece, and like most things cancer-wise it's incredibly subjective. I remember first seeing the term 'finding my new normal' when I was undergoing chemotherapy back in May 2018, and at the time I didn't think it was even something I could contemplate.

But the journey of self-discovery started just there – without even realising it at the time. I've always been a fairly confident person, family orientated and career focussed – so the grenade of a primary breast cancer diagnosis at 29 years old was an absolute shocker for us. The sense of 'normal' that I had doubted and picked apart for so many years was the one thing I was desperate to cling onto. Normality didn't exist anymore – rolling with the punches and digging deep became my priority, surviving day to day and worrying about everything else later on (I would also worry about the thought of having to worry in the future!).

And yet again, without consciously knowing it, the new version of me was slowly gathering right from the very start of my diagnosis. It forced me to prioritise self-care and wellbeing, which I was previously good at talking about (but not so great at practising). Cancer forced me to look in the mirror at my dramatic physical transformation, with all the bells and whistles that hair loss and weight gain present. But most importantly, how I felt inside was changing too. Like other cancer patients I was chronically ill, exhausted, completely and emotionally drained; but I was also floating through a bizarre and unknown territory. I knew I could never be the woman I was ever again – she was gone in a lot of ways. But I could choose to carry forward the parts of her I liked, and in a sense reinvent everything else to design whatever my new 'normal' was going to be.

After emergency fertility preservation, chemotherapy, surgery and radiotherapy, I sometimes wondered if there would be anything left of me. Treatment was hard. Gruelling. It felt like a punishment even though it was saving my life, a mass of contradictions in every way possible. But I knew that the only way I could start my recovery was to slow down, breathe and accept the trauma we had endured as a family. Not an easy thing to do but probably one of the most powerful things I've learned.

A big part of my identity before cancer honed in on my career, and I've come to realise that I pinned a large degree of my self-worth on that. It makes sense to me now, as historically I felt more stress and anxiety about my building a professional reputation and how my 'employee brand' was perceived by others. Don't get me wrong - I still have those little moments, but the difference is that

I notice the tide rising and my self-awareness kicks in faster now. I've realised that I will be more productive, content and satisfied by getting the balance right wherever I can – that means working hard, doing the right thing but knowing when to step away. Again, not easy and very much a work in progress for me!

I've been very lucky in a lot of ways - I have a small but wonderful family, a lovely circle of friends and supportive colleagues behind me. I know that it isn't the case for everyone going through cancer, and I can't begin to imagine how hard that must be. I was fortunate enough to be well looked after by my employer when I was off work for treatment, and they recognised a gap in supporting employees going through cancer. That's where *Working With Cancer* came in – I was the guinea pig¹, and I'm very proud of it. Apologies in advance for embarrassing you, but my time with Maggie (my WWC Coach) was essential in finding my new normal. She listened to me without judgement, gently challenged my thinking and gave me regular support to transition back into my noisy but loveable working environment. What was normal before wasn't normal anymore, and talking about how that looked and felt helped me to find what was right for me moving forward.

And that's the best piece of advice I have for anyone fighting cancer, or for those supporting someone who is. Talk about it. Whether it's with family, friends, or organisations such as WWC or Macmillan; it's ok to ask for help and invite a listening ear. And it's not weird to talk to yourself - sometimes the person we neglect the most is the one inside our own skin. Cancer is awful, there's no escaping that – but for me it became easier to accept by exploring my feelings and verbalising them. The journey to self-discovery is a bumpy one, and I've only just ventured outside – everyone has different ways of navigating through the mud, but riding the waves and keeping your support network close will help you to move forward.

Whatever 'normal' is doesn't interest me anymore... we're all unique and I wouldn't want it any other way. My version is right for me, and embracing that is liberating. As I mentioned before: get on that hypothetical surf board and ride the wave, accepting that you may fall off from time to time. But get back up, and try again.

¹ Fay's employer decided to pilot Working With Cancer's coaching services in early 2019.