

# SELF IMAGE & SELF ADVOCACY

*First steps to reclaiming your body after cancer...*

By Katelyn Carey, BSN, RN

When I had my mastectomy, I was a 29 year old single woman, with a professional hobby in bellydancing (with a lot of expensive, low cut costumes in my closet). I was very large chested (F-cup). I wanted children some day, and part of my job at the time was teaching new mothers how to breastfeed...something I knew I would never be able to do. Do you see the potential for some emotional whiplash here? I did too.

The way we see ourselves is important. **Billion dollar industries are built around self-image and identity.** Products are sold in fashion and makeup that are all about helping us build and maintain the identity that we want to look and feel like. One of the most well known motivational speakers out there (Tony Robbins) bases his platform on the idea that we all act in keeping with our identity. If we see ourselves as unworthy, we act unworthy and we surrender easily. If we identify as powerful and unstoppable, then we persevere through tough times because that is who we are. Our actions reflect our core beliefs about who we are as a person.

This same concept is studied in science. In the study of "Identity

Threat", we look at what happens when the judgements of others (or our own internal judgements and fears) cause us to feel like our identity has become shaky or threatened in some way. A breast cancer diagnosis is very threatening to most women. In fact, **over 3/4 of women diagnosed with breast cancer end up struggling with self image.**

For those facing chemo, hair loss is especially threatening to feminine image, even more so (according to studies) for African American women and some other cultures who see hair as specifically symbolizing power, identity, sexuality, or femininity. Treatment side effects can also cause low energy and low focus that can affect our ability to perform the roles that are important to us. Fertility and sexuality may also be affected by treatments. And then there's surgery- which can alter or remove our breasts. Wow. Is it any surprise that women struggle with self image and identity?

So let's talk answers.

I obviously do not possess a magic wand. If I ever get one, I promise I will wipe cancer off the face of the planet. Until then, what helps us to stand strong in ourselves in the face of cancer?



Katelyn

Photo from "Beauty After Breast Cancer"

It starts within ourselves. Next month I'll dive into more resources like wigs and prosthetics. But even those resources will be more effective if we start here...

We can be our own worst critics. All the judgement we've ever heard or suspected others of making about us can be replayed in our internal monologues in some very unfriendly ways. This is especially true if you have ever been involved in any kind of abusive or neglectful relationships. **Monitor your own internal voice,** and make sure you are supporting yourself and speaking to yourself in the voice of a friend (and not a voice that is condemning or judgmental). If you have a complex history, it may take a professional counselor to help you retrain that voice. And it will definitely take practice.

One of the first things I did after deciding on a bilateral mastectomy was set myself up with a counselor. I didn't know how I was going to react to this surgery, and I thought I'd like

to be set up with someone I trusted and could talk to just in case. I highly encourage this idea for others. And it was worth every cent I payed and more to find out from my counselor that **anesthesia itself can cause mood swings and depression for several months after a surgery.** If you know this, you can be better prepared and more patient with yourself.

Scripting is another tool that I want to explore with you. Imagine for a moment that you are standing in the middle of a field filled with tall grass and various other flowers and plant life. On the edge of the field is the woods, where you would like to go. So you pick a direction and walk. The next time you come back to this place, maybe you pick a different direction to walk. But the more times you come back here, the more likely you are to establish a usual route that actually creates a physical, cleared path. And when you come back, if you're not intentionally choosing otherwise, you will default to your easily-traveled usual path.

Your thoughts work the same way. **You build pathways in your brain that your thoughts travel along.** If those thoughts are negative or critical, you can choose a different path. Just like your feet could choose a different route. But you will have to consciously choose to do this.

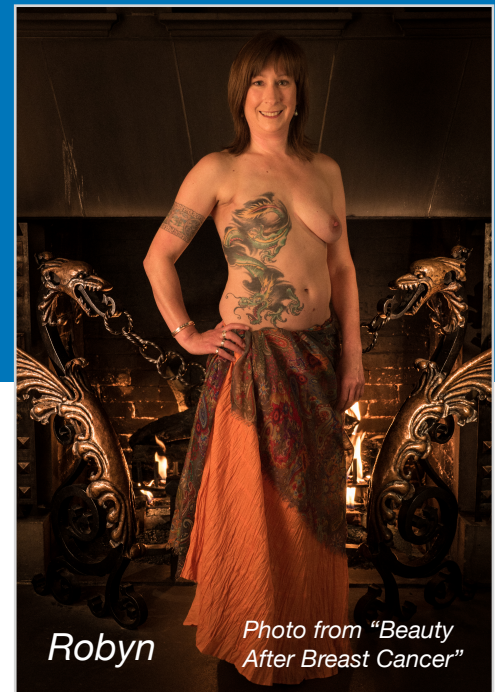
After my mastectomy, I would tear up and get incredibly sad when I would teach new mom's to breastfeed. I knew I was witnessing a special moment that I would never have, and my mind and heart felt grief and loss.

*"Her new script transitioned her from victim to survivor."*

So I chose a different path...I practiced traveling this new mental path. It was "I would rather be there for my children than breastfeed them". I was making a commitment that my surgery meant I was less likely to die and leave my children before they were grown. As I practiced these words, my feelings slowly shifted from loss and grief, to pride and determination.

Robyn is another person who changed her internal script, using an external action as her pivot point. Every time Robyn looked in the mirror, her inner voice was stuck in the traumatized statement of "look what cancer did to me". After sitting down with her support team, Robyn came up with the idea of a tattoo...a dragon that she named Shoyru. That dragon was able to help her change her inner narrative to "look what I did with cancer". **Her new script transitioned her from victim to survivor.**

What scripts are you telling yourself? What paths can you change to be your own advocate in these times? Start small if you need to, maybe by just thanking your body for its work in fighting against the cancer. Build from there as you gain traction.



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Writer Katelyn Carey is a nurse educator and author who specializes in trauma-based communication and education. Using cognitive science and 20 years experience in ER, Hospice, and acute care, Katelyn teaches communication strategies and recovery tools that are research based and trauma informed.

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