

# BREAKING UP WITH MY BREASTS

*What it's like to say goodbye to part of our body...*

By Katelyn Carey, BSN, RN

This is going to sound weird. Sometimes I feel like I had a really bad breakup with my boobs. I thought we were going to be together for the rest of my life, but it turns out they may have been trying to kill me. Which goes beyond your basic bad relationship.

I feel like this metaphor works because of everything that followed. Just like with a bad relationship I struggled to find the silver lining by doing things like listing everything I didn't like about my boobs and wouldn't miss. Just like with a really bad breakup I felt grief and loss. I **worried about if anyone would find me attractive** in the same way again. I was shook up and feeling insecure. Was I still lovable? Was I still as attractive as I was before? Or was I damaged goods?

When we go through a bad relationship breakup, most of us reach out to our friends to help stabilize us. **Our friends give us love, they tell us that we're beautiful**, and they remind us of all the better opportunities that will await us now that the potential threats and negative sides of that relationship are no longer so present in our life.

Their support doesn't erase the grief we're feeling, but it does make us feel less adrift. Their stories remind us of all the important things in our life that are still present. Their hugs remind us that we are still lovable and worthy. And through their stories we are reminded that we are not alone in our experience, other people have felt this way too. **And if it was possible for them to move through those feelings and regain their sense of self and strength again...we begin to believe that we can too.**

We readily seek support in the above metaphor, but we seem less likely to seek that same support when facing cancer. Maybe that's because people don't know what to say...the experience isn't as common and shared. Our regular community and friends can still help us feel loved and valued, but it's not the same as being able to talk to a friend who has been where we are and navigated that path successfully.

**These knowledgeable new friends can be found** in local or online breast cancer support groups. Sometimes they can be found at breast cancer awareness or support events. Many times your medical team can direct you to local resources; and a hospital



Georgean

Photo from "Beauty After Breast Cancer"

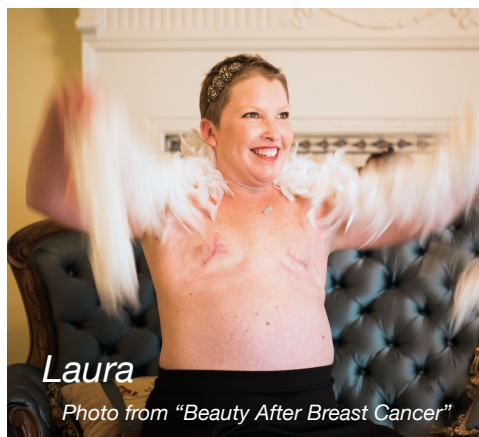
Oncology Patient Navigator is a wealth of information.

Sometimes we think we can muscle through without that support, but then we miss the stories that make us think, "oh my gosh, yes! That's what I'm feeling right now." Or we miss the **advice that could have made our recovery faster and smoother**. I know my recovery was definitely helped by hearing about the experiences and recovery strategies that other breast cancer patients found most important. Their words eventually formed the *Beauty After Breast Cancer* book. I'd like to share a few images and tips from that book.

At 85, Georgean is the oldest participant in the book. Her words ring with the wisdom that is granted to truly strong women who live their lives joyfully and intentionally. She tells us all, "I am a mass of scars. They tell the story of my life: from my hysterectomy, to my stretch marks from my three children, to my gallbladder surgery, to my breast

surgery scars. **But if anyone thinks those scars and stories somehow make me a lesser person, I don't really care to know that person anyway".**

Georgean makes us feel strong, like our bodies and our wisdom have been hard earned and are worth being proud of.



Laura

Photo from "Beauty After Breast Cancer"

Laura is a true warrior; she spoke of how horrified she had been when she first saw her scars. Her body didn't match the expectations she had built based on photos from the doctors office. Slowly, however, she began to look at her body differently. Instead of seeing an enemy, or something to be rejected, she saw her **body as "my hero, that went to war for my life"**. Her scars represent a second chance at life.

Kitty had one of the hardest struggles I have ever seen. She was so certain that breast cancer would be her death sentence that she sank into a profound depression for many months. When she finally was able to seek help she was able to begin her recovery. Kitty coached us all to "give it time", this journey will take place over multiple stages, and over multiple months or years.

*Cancer doesn't just push people apart, it also pulls them together...*

**Recovery isn't one thing, it is many things...**many steps that take us to a better place.

Toni models bravery for all of us. When her connection with her husband became shaky, she went to him and asked why he wasn't touching her anymore. Turned out he was afraid of hurting her and unsure what would be painful or what would still feel good. They needed to redefine their intimacy.

Their conversation reminds us all that sometimes a change in intimacy is coming from our partner's fears and uncertainties, and not from a lack of attraction or love. They mutually decided on a chest tattoo that would honor Toni's strength and their relationship. **Cancer doesn't just push people apart, it also pulls them together.**

Whatever resources you are ready for - take the time to reach out. And a month from now, maybe reevaluate and reach out to the next level. Strength doesn't come from standing alone in a storm. It comes from knowing to accept help when you need it, and sometimes being able to offer your understanding to others as well.



Toni

Photo from "Beauty After Breast Cancer"



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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