

Cancer Has...

Cancer has...stripped away my professional identity

I was a Lecturer and Course Leader of Counselling, supporting students to tell their life stories, and create capacity to hold the stories of their clients. I was also a business owner. I had a small private practice which I ran from a therapy room in my home. I really enjoyed working with clients, to sort through their problems and hold space for an updated version of themselves to emerge. Upon my diagnosis, all of this disappeared. I was now a cancer patient. A dying cancer patient, whose full-time job was attending appointments and taking up space on the sofa or in bed. I went from client to patient and everything I had worked for vanished as if it was all a dream.

Cancer has...taken my body

It was January 2023, it was 'New Year, New Me' territory. I got myself a personal trainer and overhauled my diet and exercise programme. A few months down the line I had reclaimed the body confidence of my 20's and had energy in abundance! I was living my best life, and my smile had never shone more confidently. That is until I was diagnosed. "This shouldn't be happening" were the first words the A&E consultant said to me. It shouldn't have been, but here I was, 37 years old and I had cancerous lesions all along my spine. Over the next 12 months I would gain over 30 kilos in weight and lose all ability to work out or exercise properly. A short walk down the street and back home could exhaust me for hours and potentially cause pain for days. I now look at myself in the mirror and no longer recognise the person looking back at me. My smile has lost its shine and I hide in the most oversized clothes I can find.

Cancer has...taught me that I can endure

Many times, in my personal and professional life I would hear stories that would give me goosebumps and I would say something along the lines of "I don't know how they went through that, I just wouldn't survive!" In my pre-cancer life, even having blood drawn or taking a new pill which the doctor prescribed could cause a huge amount of anxiety and worry. Flash forward, and as I sit and write this, I've had a major operation on my leg to fit a titanium rod, which has allowed me to continue to walk. I have had to learn to walk again following this operation. I have had countless blood tests, cannulations and IV infusions. I have undertaken chemotherapy and radiotherapy. It feels like I have been stuck inside every medical scanner that exists. I have endured more pain and horrible cancer symptoms than I knew possible. My ability to survive has shocked me. Cancer has taught me that I can actually endure

so much more than I ever thought possible. My mind and body are much stronger than I ever gave them credit for!

Cancer has...changed all of my relationships

Pre-cancer I was in a poly-relationship, exploring my abilities to love and connect with other gay men. I loved getting to know new men, hearing their stories and understanding who they were. Some of my favourite times were having hours long conversations about relationships, love, and attraction. My partner Stu and I felt liberated by our ability to love each other, but not feel 'owned' or 'caged' by that love. It was fun and we both felt alive! Even if this was a 'phase' or 'stage', life was to be lived, and we were embracing the freedom that being gay allowed us.

Post-cancer, my partner has now become my part time carer. Neither of us have the energy nor capacity to consider connecting with others. Our connection to each other has had to change so much, and the vibrancy of being young has died overnight. The feeling of freedom has been locked away in a cancerous cage, and all we both yearn for is a symptom free evening to watch tv on the sofa. Our love has deepened in other ways, and we have both surprised each other by our own resilience. We have been forced to adapt, grieving the life that we had, while still trying to embrace what we still have now.

Equally my friendships have also forever changed. It feels like a lifetime ago that I was bringing humorous tales of my latest dating disaster or asking for advice on a moral quandary that I'd fallen into. Now all I have to bring are my latest results from clinic, and I'm just desperate for my friends to bring me stories and dramas from their lives. I'm desperate for them to share some of their 'Joie de vivre' with me and tell me tales from a world that is no longer mine to be a part of.

Cancer has...altered reality forever

Pre-cancer I was a planner! I was booked up 3-4 weeks in advance, and my calendar was full of nights out, theatre trips, cinema trips, gaming sessions, coffee meets and dinner dates. Life was exciting, vibrant, and sometimes exhausting!

Post-cancer my sense of control and ability to plan has been ripped up, set on fire, and banished to the 9th circle of hell! Staples in my diary are now scan appointments, results of scan appointments, and support for dying of cancer appointments. Yes I get the odd coffee catchup, or meal out in between when I'm not in too much pain, or coughing up blood....but this is far removed from what was before. If I were to silver line the experience, I could say that this has taught me to live more in the moment, or to not 'plan my life away'. In a sense it has, but I would happily trade it in for what I had before!

Cancer has...isolated me

There are many inspirational pieces of writing out there which will silver line and repackage cancer into many positive things. In my own journey with cancer, I have longed to read more of the reality of how destructive cancer can be. This is not to depress or upset myself, but rather to feel seen and feel less alone in the horribleness and awfulness of this disease. If you are a fellow cancer patient, I hope this helps you to feel less isolated in your experiences. I hope it helps you to give your own struggles a voice, and to not feel like you must be positive all the time. There is much to learn from cancer and finding the moments of joy during your toughest days is important, however, I feel that it is just as important to let yourself express how rough and awful this experience can be! As Andrea Gibson wrote in her fantastic poem, Grief Astronomer, "the darkness also contains truths that could bring the light to its knees".





