

Surviving Breast Cancer

What To Do Next?

by DeBorrah Carter

*I'm a survivor,
I'm not gon' give up
I'm not gon' stop,
I'm gon' work harder
I'm a survivor,
I'm gonna make it
I will survive,
keep on survivin'*

~Destiny's Child, "Survivor" (2001)

*Go on now, go, walk out the door
Just turn around now
'Cause you're not welcome anymore (DeBorrah adds "cancer you're not welcome anymore")
You think I'd crumble?
You think I'd lay down and die?
Oh no, not I, I will survive
Oh, as long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive . . .*

Gloria Gaynor, "I Will Survive" (1978)

These two songs can be called "cancer mantras" for breast cancer survivors. Sure, they talk about love lost, and we certainly have no love lost for breast cancer. Yet the power of "I Will Survive" or "Survivor" resounds through the refrains. (I sang the Destiny's Child version at a women's conference six weeks after treatment and had a group of five hundred women standing on their feet, singing along with me.)

“Thank you, God, I survived breast cancer! Now what’s next?”

You’ve come through diagnosis. You made it through treatment, whether it’s surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, a combination of all, or maybe just one or two. But you made it through. Now what do you do? I’m a survivor and peer/patient breast cancer navigator. I know what I needed, so I’m sharing some of that knowledge with you.

Have a Survivorship Plan.

A survivorship plan is actually a folder in which you will have listed everything someone who cares for you will have access to (HIPPA approved). Keep it easily accessible so your “support team” can actually be your support team.

In your survivorship plan will be the name(s) of all of your doctors, including your primary care physician, who is part of your “follow-up” team, as well as a nutritionist.

List the medications you will be taking, including supplements (if allowed).

Appointment dates and times, so your HIPPA approved caregiver can take you should you become unable drive yourself. If possible, always have someone with you during your visits. Note: Keep every appointment with your physicians. Some oncologists will follow you for five years. Some will follow you even longer. Try to find an oncologist who will be with you for a very long time and who listens to you.

Log in all of your physician comments. Doing so will assist you and your caregiver as well as other doctors to know each step of your journey and allows them to better provide your aftercare needs.

Your support team includes caregivers, trusted friends, other survivors, and a positive support group (if you have a group that you attend).

Each person on your team should be a positive individual. If there is someone who is toxic, negative, or always saying they are worried, then do not include them in your team, even if that person is a family member or close friend.

What your food preferences are. This is important because some of us have allergies or may not be able to tolerate certain foods because of medications. Some aftercare medications may give you hot flashes, so jot down what foods make you feel better.

A section for what makes you feel good (physically, mentally, and emotionally) and what makes you feel not so good. (This is not a replacement for your journal; however, your physicians need to know this information to help with any necessary adjustments, including medications and foods or activities.)

Love Yourself.

What do you mean, love myself? I mean just that. You are a “new you.” Take care of yourself first, and don’t try to do what everyone else feels you should. Relax, Rest, Release! You don’t need to run a marathon during your first year of recovery. If you’d like to do a 5K walk, do it, but you don’t have to. You don’t need to become Martha Stewart. Enjoy meals that someone else prepares, or if you’d like to try some new recipe, do it, but not for fifty people. Do it just for yourself. Mind how you feel, not anyone else. Have someone give you a massage or just bask in the sunlight. Take a walk in the park. If you live in an area where you can see the stars, look out at night and be grateful for the beauty of the sky.

Keep a Greatfulness Journal.

Journals are wonderful in expressing yourself. Every day, find something to be grateful for. Every day, find one positive thing in spite of all the mess. Be

grateful that even though you don't feel like getting out of bed, you have a bed. Even if you hate running to the restroom, you have a restroom. Find one thing every day.

Give Yourself a Makeover.

Are you out of your mind? A makeover? What? Yes, a makeover. You can do it! Personal story. My daughter lives 2300 miles away from me. She's a hairstylist. She flew to California and made me three beautiful wigs that could only fit my head. I had a "grocery store wig" for everyday activities. I had a "sassy wig" for those days I wanted to be sassy and stylish. Then she made me a "glamour wig" for those days I wanted to be sexy. Many hospitals can recommend wig specialists, if you so choose. I love hats, being originally from the East Coast. When I wasn't feeling a wig, I wore the most amazing hats—not just caps but real hats, even a leather cowgirl hat, along with some leather pants. I also love headwraps. I purchase the most beautiful (and still inexpensive) wraps, and they are very chic. YouTube has great videos for those who have never wrapped before.

Care for your skin! Speak with a certified cancer dermatologist or aesthetician about skin care.

Wear lipstick or lip gloss, even during a pandemic when no one can see your lips. You will feel better.

Lost your eyelashes? Okay. Just use a little eyeliner. For eyebrows, there are so many new products to make wonderful eyebrows and not come out looking like Joan Crawford! Need help? Ask someone you trust on your support team.

Get new lingerie! What? I had a mastectomy! I had a lumpectomy! What new lingerie? Are you crazy? I'm not feeling that one! Let me tell you, whether you have a prosthesis (or not) or breasts of different sizes, brand new lingerie will do wonders. Once again, many hospitals will be able to recommend you to a bra specialist or bra retailers who specialize

in breast cancer. Get pretty stuff; it's out there. Get that trusted support friend to go with you or wade through online catalogs with you. If you have a cancer support group, make it a party. We are celebrating having another day of life! Another day . . . that is to be celebrated. I won't share my age here, but trust me, as a twenty-year survivor, I'm no spring chicken. But I love pretty bras and panties, even though no one but myself sees them. Can I get an amen, sister?

Acknowledge Your Fear.

We are all afraid that first year, or the next three years, and finally wondering if we will get to the magical number of five-year survivorship. Acknowledge it. It's okay to cry and share it with that trusted "support" person or write it in your journal or share it through CaringBridge, which is an online support group who may not know you personally but will give you a safe haven to share your feelings.

Surround Yourself with Loving People and Pray Together.

Live life! Find the most fun people you can and laugh, a lot. I have a friend that will call me up and say "Girl, let me tell you." She's a gossip, but I love her funny gossip stories. Not bad stuff, just funny stuff that she sees and calls to tell me. I'm a spiritual person, but not everyone is. I know and acknowledge Who brought me through this. I celebrated twenty years as a breast cancer survivor in February 2021. With all that I've written in this article, I could not have done it without God. I know that. For you, find that peace that surpasses all understanding and trust me. You will sing as I did "I'm a survivor. I'm gonna make it!"