

Book On Coping With Cancer

Beautiful, confident, inspiring. Meet author of 'Coping with Cancer', Dr. Jennifer Mamby-Alexander.

The very active mother of three is into celebrating life and these days she celebrates life as a virgin author with her book *A Practical Guide to Coping with Cancer*. She felt a compulsion to write the book to assist not only cancer patients, their families, friends and caregivers. The aim of the self-published book is not to expound on the disease, but to give tips on dealing with the diagnosis. It addresses issues like how a spouse deals with the diagnosis and dealing with the medical side effects.

In it, she also gives a synopsis of her story as a testament to the fact that these tips worked for her. Despite being clear of the cancer for so long, she admits she still has lingering fears which allow her to understand the predicament of other women.

But the active 'get on with life' doctor was not always at this place of confidence. For her, seconds have turned into minutes; minutes into hours; hours into days; and days into an eternity, since her brush with death 20 years ago. "When some people look at two weeks, they say that's so short. I think, two weeks, I can do so much," said Dr Mamby-Alexander, who was once diagnosed with breast cancer.

Being a doctor did not lessen the effects of the disease. She was devastated and had tremendous fear of death, especially because her diagnosis was delayed and misread for three years. "My prognosis was not good," she explained, and she, typical doer that she is, took the diagnosis into her own hands, after years of being told by doctors overseas that nothing was wrong. Her own analysis of her X-rays and the confirmation by long-time friend and teacher Dr Freddie Clarke, confirmed her worst fears.

She knew what was ahead: the dreaded mastectomy and a slew of side effects from chemotherapy, one of the most horrific being hair loss. She searched for any hope that she wouldn't have to lose her hair. She heard that some women wore rubber bands around their heads during the treatments so the rays would not hit the roots during 'chemo' and so, they wouldn't lose their hair.

"I tried everything, but in three weeks, I had total hair loss. Eyelashes, eyebrows, skin, everything was gone. I was as clean as a whistle," she said. "I actually felt like a eunuch because I had lost a breast, I had lost my hair. My period had just stopped and I didn't know when it would come back, and I basically did not know what to do," she added. That was when she summoned all her strength and dug in her heels. "I had to take my life in four-hour periods and at the end of each ... I started over again," she explained.

And just when she thought the worst was past, they discovered cancer cells resting in her sternum bone. This meant that she was much more advanced than was initially thought. "After my sternum bone was removed and replaced by a metal plate with screws, I was very depressed. I thought that I was having a recurrence. There were nights that I was in so much pain, I wasn't even able to call out to anyone. I tried to reach for my cell phone at my bedside and I couldn't reach it. It was very scary for me."

However, she found practical ways to live minute to minute. She fully understood the concept that if you look good, you begin to feel good, so to compensate for the hair loss, she bought several wigs. For the loss of the eyebrows, she put on eyebrow pencil, for the darkening of her skin, she wore make-up. When the nails became discoloured, she simply wore nail polish. I bought clothes. "I did not go anywhere without lipstick from that day because I had to make sure when I looked at myself, I wasn't always reminding myself that I was a cancer patient, I'm also a woman."

She says she has a full understanding of why some cancer patients, even if they have been in remission, are afraid of going for their check ups. "Even now, I still have to go for annual checks and, believe me, if I'm supposed to go in February, sometimes I'll go in June because I'm just not ready," she admitted.

What is important, she stressed, is handling the diagnosis with grace and not thinking less of yourself because you have to suffer through the disease.

The book is available at Sangster's, Kingston Bookshops and Books and More in Savanna-la-Mar.

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Email Dr. Mamby Alexander at : jensy_ja@yahoo.com