

Interview with **Dr. Melanie Schlatter**

How have Breast Friends' discussions and activities helped women deal with the disease?

The monthly meetings for breast cancer patients and survivors are fun, interactive, supportive, and educational gatherings which have focused on everything from health and beauty, to chocolate tasting and relationship support. Every month is different. The meetings empower women through their cancer process, and the chance to talk to other women and to see how wonderfully they are coping, is invaluable to normalize their fears or feelings of isolation.

What kind of support do you offer to women?

I am on the committee of Brest Friends, so I help to answer emails, and organize monthly meetings. My primary work is as a Health Psychologist at the Well Woman Clinic though-thus I help clients learn to cope with the physical and psychological ramifications of the disease process-whether it be for cancer or any other illness. I also help healthy individuals overcome stress, anxiety, and depression.

You speak of the modern woman who juggles a job and a family and neglects her personal health in consequence, what effect do you think our fast paced society has had on women's overall health?

We need to understand that although a healthy diet, ample sleep, and daily exercise are a significant buffer against illness, we cannot expect to run our lives in a frantic stressed state-it can cause an increase in significant hormones which can affect how our immune systems function.

How important is it for cancer patients to bond and share their experiences during treatment?

More often than not, it is extremely important, and it can help provide a solid foundation for coping with the process-because the process is often long and arduous. Those who try to be brave or go at it alone (or even keep it a



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secret) may find the road a lot more difficult. In saying that, my own research has shown that women who chose not to attend regular support group meetings-but whom had a solid personal support structure and / or strong beliefs that empowered them (such as religious or spiritual beliefs-ended up coping just as well as women who did attend the meetings, as measured by psychological questionnaires. Regardless, there is strong empirical support for psychological and emotional support during the process.

How do you help younger women deal with the psychological trauma of breast cancer, with regards to its effects on sexuality and femininity?

With a lot of patience and empathy. Due to the fact that younger clients often have yet to start a typical life journey (eg- perhaps meeting a partner, or getting married and starting a family) you have to help them believe that life really can continue in a positive way, irrespective of what they look like. This is not to say that what they have been through won't change them in some way, but many women find that once they have ended their treatments, it becomes easier to envision and re-engage their past hopes and dreams, including the ability to look better and feel better once again.

What do you have to say to soothe the women who are dreading or fearing the chemotherapy process?

If the woman accepts that chemotherapy is a necessary part of her treatment in order to cure her, then it's mainly about educating them. Different forms of treatments have different side effects, so it's about explaining how and when they will feel affected physically and emotionally, and that this will undoubtedly affect them psychologically. The idea is to normalize the process for them, empower them, and support them through until the end. We then go through various methods of coping-such as relaxation and visualization techniques; emotional expression; sleep hygiene; and thought records to decrease the frequency and intensity of any negative thoughts. The process includes helping them through their individual circumstances as they occur also-for instance, children may not understand why mum can't do everything she used to, teenagers may rebel, old friends may disappear, and husbands or strangers may say something unhelpful. If women are particularly reluctant, don't believe in the treatment, or have premonitory psychological problems or difficult life circumstances, then more emphasis will be placed on those issues, whilst still trying to normalize the treatment process for them.

How crucial is health psychology in the diagnosis, treatment and post treatment processes?

Although it is virtually unknown in this region, the role of health psychology is vital. Women are talking to someone who knows the finer details about everything from the shock of diagnosis to their specific treatment process and the likely circumstances that will arise from that process. It is someone who is there to focus exclusively on making them feel better. Usually it's not until the woman shows significant signs of depression or anxiety here that her physician will make a referral, which is extremely sad. But in other countries, we are automatically part of the larger team consisting of the breast surgeon, nurse, oncologist, radiologist, and so forth, which reduces any stigma or fear of seeing a psychologist. We know that it all starts from Day 1, so why not provide the service then? Women often claim that they feel lumped in as a number in the hospital process, so again, focusing on their personal situation exclusively from the beginning has multiple benefits.

What are people's reactions to breast cancer diagnosis nowadays? What about women in the Middle East in particular?

Although there is unquestionably a lot more hope, support, and awareness out there, the initial diagnosis will still carry a hefty personal shock to that individual. What I believe has changed significantly though is the attention placed on breast cancer-what has been done to make it far less stigmatizing, shameful, or embarrassing than it has been viewed in the past. For many women in the Middle East, and for a multitude of reasons, just talking about one's breast or requesting medical attention for that area is incredibly difficult, and potentially embarrassing and stigmatizing-often to the extent that women will not show up for an examination or treatment, until they are in the highly advanced stages. They just don't want to be part of that group as such-they want to continue their lives as if nothing had ever happened. But, magnificent organizations and services have been established here to raise



BurJuman Safe and Sound Pink Walkathon 2011

awareness about prevention and detection, and to provide much needed support-whether financial, medical, or emotional. The Middle East still has a fair way to go, but it has certainly been making solid progress in the past few years.

October is the month of Breast Cancer awareness, what are some happenings that you like to shed some light on?

On the 21st of October, Brest Friends, will be having its monthly meeting at Emirates Towers, but naturally, with an emphasis on Breast Cancer Awareness month. The details are still a surprise, but every breast cancer patient and survivor can be assured of a fun evening, with wonderful food, and goody bags to take home! Patients and survivors are welcome to email us at brestfriends@gmail.com

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Being wonderfully shocked and astounded by the way some women adapt and change their lives for the better as a result of cancer. They don't let it suppress who they are, and they become far happier individuals who truly learn how to live life. In a sentence, they don't put up with the crap that they used to, and they genuinely believe that each day is a true blessing!

What are some encouraging words you have for Breast cancer patients and survivors?

You will get through this, and your life can get better--just reach out for help, don't suffer in silence. And don't forget to be totally and utterly and unashamedly proud of who you are. For more information, please visit: www.wellwomanclinic.ae

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