

Lisa Yull has always put her loved ones first; as a single mom with two teenage daughters, her family has always been her biggest priority. And, for Lisa, this lifelong habit continued even when she was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2010.

Her initial diagnosis came just before Christmas, and she did everything she could to minimize the impact it would have on her family. She chose to delay starting her treatment until after the holidays so that she wouldn't miss out on any time with her girls. When the cancer came back four years later and another surgery was scheduled for December 2, she prepared every aspect of the holidays in advance so her daughters wouldn't miss out.

Lisa even attempted to put others ahead of herself when she eventually returned to work with the RCMP, but it was a bigger challenge than she expected. A month after she returned, she realized jumping back into full-time work was too much.

"All of the effects of cancer seemed to hit on mass. It just seemed like everything crashed down at the same time," she says.

While physical recovery was difficult, the mental hurdles were just as challenging. One day by chance, Lisa was driving past the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation and remembered something: she had reached out to a Cancer Coach after her initial diagnosis and their meetings had been incredibly helpful. With what she had been facing at work, Lisa knew right then what she needed to do and set up another appointment with a Cancer Coach.

"My Coach challenged me to look at setting goals for myself, as opposed to setting goals for everybody else. I'm very much about making sure that everybody else is okay, and forgetting about me," Lisa says. "But if I don't take care of me, I'm not going to be able to take care of anybody else."

Through Coaching Lisa learned many things, including the importance of slowing down and making herself a priority.

At her Coach's suggestion, Lisa also joined the Cancer Foundation's Work and Cancer Survivorship program, designed to help navigate the physical and mental challenges of returning to work after cancer treatment. In those sessions she not only received support from the Cancer Coaches, but gained understanding from other survivors who had made the transition back to work.

"I used to wear the business suits, the high heels and the nylons, and I can't do that anymore. When I mentioned this to the group, a woman said, me too! And it was right away we discovered this connection, this commonality. It's a silly thing, but it really isn't."

Lisa has since adopted a more gradual transition back to her workplace, and with the support of her employer and colleagues, is doing it on her own terms.

"My folks at the RCMP are fabulous, they're making the accommodations that I need."

Lisa's attitude now is that moving forward – in work and in life – often just means managing things with a new perspective.

"I strive, I thrive, and I live – I just live differently."

Supporting Caregivers:

How Coaching Helped Ariane Support her Family and Herself

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, it can affect each member of the family very differently. While finding out that her father had cancer was already difficult enough for Ariane, it was complicated further by the fact that she was living so far away from home.

She remembers the exact day it happened; she was on the bus leaving work when she received a text from her mom. It said to call home.

Ariane immediately knew something was very wrong, as she talked with her parents on the phone every day. Her dad had been having digestive problems, but she never expected this – pancreatic cancer.

“I zoned out,” Ariane says. “It didn’t sink in. Then I started to cry, and didn’t want to talk about it.”

Not only was she in shock, she felt guilty for not being there with her family; pursuing her career as a legislative clerk in Ottawa meant that her family was far away in Quebec. “I felt like I was letting my dad and my family down,” Ariane says. “I didn’t know how to cope, and I didn’t know how to help.”

It was fear, on top of worry, on top of guilt, and Ariane was carrying all of it. The weight became too much to bear. “I was freaking out,” she says.

So that’s when Ariane turned to a Cancer Coach. “Learning about Cancer Coaching was the best news I had gotten in the weeks after my dad’s diagnosis,” Ariane says. She describes it as nothing short of a revelation.

“Cancer Coaching is a safe place. I felt so much better after just the first session,” she says. “You can talk about anything, you can cry, or you can just vent about cancer.”

And along with providing emotional support, Ariane’s Coach helped her learn practical strategies she could use to communicate with and support her family. She discovered how to stay in the moment with her dad, listen better to her family’s concerns, understand what they were going through, and better support her mom and her sister.

“I also discovered I needed to take some time for myself,” Ariane says. Her coach encouraged her to journal and connected her with the Cancer Foundation’s caregiver’s workshop, where she learned to use meditation and yoga to feel better.

And most importantly, she learned not to compare herself to other caregivers. “I realized I’m not a bad person just because I couldn’t be there 24/7 for my dad,” she says.

A cancer diagnosis can change everything for a family, even for those not diagnosed and who are not a primary caregiver. But Cancer Coaching can be tailored to anyone who needs it, just like it empowered Ariane to cope and to help. “It’s made a big positive impact on my mental health,” Ariane says.

White Coat, Black Art

For more patient stories and information about Cancer Coaching, listen to the *White Coat, Black Art* feature on Cancer Coaching that aired on CBC Radio last October.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/white-coat/how-cancer-coaches-help-patients-navigate-an-overwhelming-diagnosis-1.4878003>

