

DR LOVE: Welcome to the Heart of Oncology. This is medical oncologist Dr Neil Love. One of the great challenges for oncology healthcare professionals is to enter the mindset of a person who has just learned of a cancer diagnosis. Unless one understands that these people fundamentally occupy a unique emotion space, it's impossible to provide relevant medical care to these patients. You are about to hear a number of women describe their initial reaction when first diagnosed with breast cancer. While there are many other variations on the themes described here, the message is the same, and one must listen to understand.

VIDEO: The very first thing that went through my mind was my children. And I know they were a year and a half, and my first thought was, "Oh my God. I don't want anyone else to have to raise my children for me. God, please keep me around, so that I can raise my children."

I didn't want my family to know. Basically, I just wanted to, in some way, be able to do away with it, without anyone knowing about it.

DR LOVE: Did you feel scared?

VIDEO: Very scared. I was so afraid. I'm the type of person that I usually have the answer for everything. I usually am able to control everything. And all of a sudden, I felt out of control.

VIDEO: This breast cancer came — really, it was like a blindside. It really hit me on the blind side. I just did not expect it. I really, almost childlike find myself or think of myself as very invulnerable.

VIDEO: I thought I was going to die. I mean, the fear — it was that little devil on my shoulder. I couldn't get it off. I didn't know how my new husband was going to react, also. I didn't know what kind of life I was going to have. I was always a very active person. I didn't know if I was going to lose quality of life, what's going to happen to me. I was planning my funeral. I was planning on what I would do first, and then I would kill myself. I really was. Suicide had gone through my mind. It was horrible.

VIDEO: I just was stunned. I think I moved mechanically for the next month. I had a dear friend that went with me to most tests and just kind of pushed me. I did the things I had to do. And I don't know if I thought about it as much as I just knew this was what I had to do.

VIDEO: Tremendous sadness to have to tell my mother. My husband and I were very shocked, and, of course, this is a part of your womanhood, which I always thought, "It is between he and I," or, "...between he, God and I."

VIDEO: "I'm going to die," was my first reaction. Because at that time, I wanted to go to school, and my kids were already finished with high school, going to college. And I felt that I was still young. I had a full life ahead of me, and I wanted to go to school with my kids. And I realized that it wasn't going to be possible, because I was going to die. Very distraught. Angry. I was very, very, very angry.

VIDEO: You know, I would have loved to be able to say, "Well, yes, Doctor, let's sit down. This is the plan. Okay? Let's do this. Let's do that. I didn't know anything about the treatments, anything about anything. So, basically, it was a matter of having to accept whatever was — my thing was asking the doctor, "Well, what do you think?" Or, "If this was your wife, what would you do? What choice would you make?"

DR LOVE: The unique set of clinical circumstances that surround a breast cancer diagnosis result in a somewhat characteristic set of responses in patients. To understand these and other variations on this theme, one must listen and ask...listen and ask...

This is the Heart of Oncology. Thanks for joining us. This is Dr Neil Love.