

# A survivor's story

Counsellor Shannon Maguire reveals her brush with breast cancer.

**I**n 2006 I was diagnosed with a highly aggressive breast cancer. My initial reaction was disbelief followed by annoyance that my carefully planned schedule was being so rudely interrupted.

I thought there must have been a mistake. I told my doctor I couldn't go to the clinic because I had an important meeting. I didn't have time for breast cancer.

What followed was a rush of appointments, tests and procedures. Within two weeks I was undergoing major surgery, not knowing exactly what would happen on the operating table. This would depend on what the surgeon found when he operated.

When I awoke, I was concerned about the extent of the surgery. I did not know whether I had undergone a full mastectomy or a 'lumpectomy' where part of the breast is removed. I didn't know if I still had my breast, or to what degree the surgery would interfere with my life and lifestyle. It was very frightening and I felt terribly vulnerable.

Radiation treatment followed surgery. I had appointments every weekday for six weeks. Radiation is an awful experience, a bit like having your breast microwaved. I got severe radiation burns, was in constant pain and became unbelievably exhausted. The treatment made me sick and consumed my life.

After five months of rush and bustle, I no longer needed treatment. That's when my struggle with breast cancer really began. Who was I after breast cancer? What impact had it had on the most precious and important parts of my life? The fall-out lasted long after cancer had been removed from my body.

I had survived breast cancer. But inside myself I was terribly lost. How did you do this thing called life after breast cancer? Life could never be the same again. Neither could I.

The crisis, trauma, stress and toxic treatment left my body, mind and emotions battered. I knew how lucky I was to be alive, loved and supported and surgery could have been much worse. But deep inside myself I couldn't feel that way. At times I felt empty, depressed and isolated.

In our society, breasts are a core aspect of our identity as women and as sexual beings. I felt mutilated, damaged, unattractive, undesirable and unwanted. Could the passionate love and desire that had always been central to my relationship survive the changes to my body and being? I wondered if my partner at the time could remain in love with and attracted to me.

Nobody talks much about life after breast cancer and how to do it. How do you move from surviving breast cancer to living after breast cancer? Breast cancer doesn't just happen to the person experiencing it. It also happens to her partner and to her relationship. How do you identify and work through all the impacts that cancer has on each of you and your relationship, and go on together from there? Nobody talks much about that. Breast cancer can have an insidious effect that is way beyond the physical presence of cancer in the body. Nobody talks much about this.

I had an adverse reaction to radiation treatment, which took over three years to recover from. I was exhausted and in pain every day. Breast cancer robbed me of some very precious parts of my life.

Now I refuse to miss out on any more of this extraordinary experience called life and this wonderful body I live within. Having been robbed of the joy of life for years, I have lost time to make up for!

Recently I joined Dragon's Abreast, a dragon boating club for women with breast cancer. I met with about thirty other brave, resilient women who have struggled and suffered and are determined to love life. We all understood an experience we had all undertaken in our in-



dividual ways. Yet early morning on Blackwattle Bay was full of delight, excitement, friendship, life and hope!

I am now vibrantly alive and full of energy. My tiny days have become big and full of living. I am reconnecting with life, people and love. I am reclaiming my body and loving every moment of it! I explore everything from dragon boating to gym workouts to zumba! I take every opportunity to stretch my mind, heart and body to the fullest. I practice the art of balance...balancing nurture with adventure, courage to change with acceptance of who I am, aloneness with togetherness. Of course I have difficult days and vulnerable times, but life can be full, rich, loving and wonderful and each day I learn a little more about how to do this.

I wish someone had told me there was a physical, psychological and emotional 'mountain' to climb to heal the far-reaching impact that cancer has on all aspects of your life. But one thing I know is YES, there is life after breast cancer and it can become rich, full and wonderful. And it's only just beginning...

**I** Shannon Maguire is a counsellor and psychotherapist who works in Newtown and Croydon. She sees women with breast cancer, and partners, family and friends of women with breast cancer, as well as couples who are facing breast cancer. Shannon can be contacted on 0431 701 729 or 02 9557 2003 or visit [www.innerwestcounsellingandtherapy.com.au](http://www.innerwestcounsellingandtherapy.com.au)