

Cancerous Mental Health: A Survivor

Jennie's physical condition led to a difficult mental illness, pushing her to find a direction of healing and wellness.

Blood oozing out, the irrepressible coughing, the endless sense of pain and tiredness; I fell onto the floor, unable to get back up. My son and husband leaping forward to help me up; tears in everyone's eyes as the backdrop of Death seemed imminent.

Two and a half years, the cycle of waking up, struggling to the clinic, having a needle in my body, an unknown liquid dripping down and draining all my energy, going home, eating a bit, vomiting it out, and trying to sleep tortured me.

A knife would go into me, removing the large cancerous lump; that grotesque thing which formed in me like a living organism, only to try and kill the host it lives in.

Yes, I survived, but my brother did not. When I was in remission my brother was diagnosed with late stage cancer. I was trying to physically and emotionally recover from my own battle only to be put into another one as I watched him shrivel and decay; our parents watched, for there was nothing to do other than to shed tears, which only intensified the pain.

A sense of despair came over me, blanketing any light and any source of happiness. I can't imagine someone who survived cancer to end up feeling lonely and defeated, but I did when my brother passed away--our whole family became covered by that heavy blanket.

I paced back and forth in my mind about the unfairness of life. Depression was an obvious side effect of all the trauma; everyday I would think about if it was worth continuing on when there was so much pain on the other side. Maybe it would have been easier to have let go and just let everything take over and take me away. There is only so much loss one person or one family can shoulder. The mental stress had become a cancer of its own.

My husband and son also have mental health issues, and when friends began taking notice of our family difficulties, they started to distance themselves; friends were no longer as willing to meet up, pick up our phone calls, or even visit. When my cancer was gone there was a large support group that would visit and check in on my health, but when signs of my depression appeared, that support group quickly evaporated. It was almost like a page from *The Scarlet Letter*, but the letter branded on me was M. As I walked down the street, it was like I was marked and people would stay away; it wasn't visible but somehow those who noticed had removed themselves from my life.

Ultimately, I don't blame them. There is a stigma amongst the Asian communities to disconnect from those who are ill, especially if it is a mental illness.

I needed help and I saw a pamphlet about Hong Fook one day. In turn, I entered their Case Management Services; I felt blessed to have my mental health worker who actively listens and

offers advice that genuinely helped me through overcoming my depression and negative thoughts. By being part of the Hong Fook family I learned about other programs and services like their “recovery journey” workshops that gave me a lot of information and allowed me to connect with many like-minded peers. Meeting others who were like me was reassuring, comforting, and empowering. The blanket that was covering my life was slowly being peeled back, but not by me alone. Others were helping me pull it back to show me there was hope and happiness if I just opened my eyes and got out of bed.

At the workshops, the Hong Fook staff invited a naturopathic doctor and Qi Gong instructor to further provide a holistic sense of healing, which built our minds and gave us additional methods to relieve stress, think positive, and essentially feel better. I particularly enjoy the dance classes as they really lift my spirits when I may experience sadness. All of us who attended have shared our stories and have learned to build a community support group that focuses on mental wellness. We are stronger than ever because we have each other.

I am sharing my journey because I noticed that many sympathize and understand more physical pain like cancer, but not mental health issues. I want those who are on their mental health recovery path not to be alone. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. I am Jennie, a cancer survivor, I was depressed, and I am on my way to mental wellness.

Jennie continues with Hong Fook in the Prevention and Promotion team, and has been discharged from the Case Management as she is empowered to help others with their wellness journey.