



Saliza with Hafizuddin and Hannah



Razak believes a positive attitude is a key factor in his wife's recovery

WHEN doctors told Razak Yaacob that his wife, Nor Azha Adnan, had breast cancer, he thought that life, as he knew it, was gone.

"It's a life changing moment. All of a sudden, I found myself with a whole new set of responsibilities — the children, managing the household, my work and wanting my wife to be her normal self."

"You take a deep breath, let the news sink in and let your head rule rather than allow your emotions to get the better of you. You take full charge of the situation," says the 58-year-old who was the primary caregiver in his wife of 32 years.

"She's my sparring partner — sometimes grouchy and cranky but a gentle, caring person. She had lost her older sister a few months earlier to breast cancer. I was not prepared to lose her, so I took charge right from start to give her the best care and, more importantly, get her back on her feet as soon as possible."

Nor Azha was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998, underwent two successful operations — a mastectomy and a hysterectomy — and is now considered free of the disease.

"Convinced that he could take care of his wife, Razak did not join any support group.

SALIZA Khalid laughs. "I am still struggling to balance my prosthetics breast with my left breast," says the 37-year-old mother of two who had undergone a mastectomy a year ago. She flips her headscarf aside, adjusts her bra and gently pushes the prosthetic in place. "Does it look balanced?" asks the campaign planning manager for Avon Cosmetics Malaysia.

She breaks into more hearty laughter as she continues. "Oh well, as my husband would say, nobody is going to bother to look at my breasts."

Her laughter is infectious as she cracks more jokes about the balancing act on her chest.

Her daughter, Hannah Irdina Harudin, 5, and son, Hafizuddin, 2, who are playing nearby, are drawn by Saliza's laughter and come over to investigate.

Hannah gives her mother a hug and returns to her toys. Hafizuddin climbs on his mother's lap.

Life after cancer

Saliza Khalid is a breast cancer survivor. The bubbly mother of two young children who had undergone mastectomy last year, tells VIMALA SENEVIRATNE that she now understands the true meaning of love

reaches up and plants a kiss on her cheek before scrambling off to play with his sister.

"They are the reason I have been able to pull through my ordeal," Saliza, the second of five siblings, confesses.

Even after she detected a lump on her right breast last June, Saliz did not delay the appointment to go for a check-up for a couple of weeks.

"My husband, Hafizuddin, refused to talk to me when I kept putting it off. Then one of my colleagues heard about this and made a special appointment for me to go for an immediate check-up. If it were up to me, I'd probably have waited longer, maybe after the conference I was going to attend in Manila."

Even though she had difficulty breast-feeding Hafizuddin after birth, she did not suspect anything was amiss.

"At that time, it seemed great that I could get back to work after the confinement period without having to worry about pumping milk in the office," she recalls.

She used to do breast self-examination and never missed any check-up session organised regularly by Avon Cosmetics. No abnormalities were ever found.

Last June she accidentally knocked against her kitchen bar counter and felt a large lump on her breast.

"Despite the pain at the back of my right shoulder and breast, I wasn't too concerned as I thought it was due to PMS. And being

busy with work didn't help either. I thought that once my period was over, the lump would disappear."

But it didn't and the pain kept recurring. Her husband, who runs his own construction firm, accompanied her to hospital where she was advised by breast surgeon Dr Azlina Firzah to do a biopsy.

"I was prepared for the worst. I cried and asked 'why me?'. The amazing thing was that when we (husband, her mum and Saliza) went to get the results the following week, my mum broke down when the test showed positive."

"I remember being calm. I wasn't afraid anymore. I'd done all the crying and leaving for a whole week before. I was determined to fight it so that I can live to see my children grow up. And yes, to grow old gracefully with my husband."

Her parents wanted her to get a second opinion and to try alternative treatment. She obliged by seeking advice from doctors in Singapore. Their advice — have a mastectomy. A month passed and the lump had not shrunk. Then her husband stopped in and took charge. Her affected breast was removed and she celebrated her 36th birthday a week later while still in hospital.

Soon after, she started her chemotherapy. There were the usual side-effects — hair loss, black nails and nausea. "But I look at the bright side. I'm saving on shampoo and no more waxing."

Saliza returned to work in January this year, after six months of medical leave. "I

missed work but I don't regret it. I thought that once my period was over, the lump would disappear."

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came back to work with a new me. I've got my perspective right this time — everything in moderation, making a balance. About the way, I've also learned that my job won't take care of me when I am sick. It's family, relatives and good friends that see me through the rough patches."

Her brush with cancer has also drawn her closer to her immediate family, especially her husband. "Do you know, ours was an arranged marriage. Love didn't come into play at first, but throughout my ordeal, he was the one person I could count on to see me through."

"There were financial issues related to my treatment and I remember him saying money would not matter if he didn't have me anymore."

"I now understand the true meaning of love," says Saliza who has completed eight of the 16 targeted Herceptin treatment. It costs RM7,000 per treatment and as this is not covered by her employer, Saliza and her husband have had to dip into their EPF savings.

She also seeks moral support by joining groups such as the Breast Cancer Helpline Association.

"She does not hesitate to advise all women to do breast self-examination or go for regular check-ups."

"Early detection has saved my life. Life doesn't come tied with a bow or ribbon, but it's still a precious gift. Granted, it sometimes isn't fair, but it's still good."

Bag it for RM25

GET yourself a goodie bag and give something to raise awareness of breast cancer. Avon Cosmetics and Pantai Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur, are selling 1,000 Pink Charity Bags at RM25. These pretty tote bags contain a surprise mix of beauty products from Avon, lotions, drinks and snacks (worth RM20). Funds raised — 100 per cent of sales — go to NGOs dedicated to breast cancer awareness work. The bags are being sold only this month at Pantai Medical Centre's Breast Care Centre. For information, call 83-2296 0089.

The goodie bag from Avon is just one of many initiatives in its Kiss Goodbye To Breast Cancer campaign. The program begins with early detection education in 2014 and goes into a pervasive nationwide corporate social responsibility exercise. Highlights include donating ultrasound scanners and lab equipment to hospitals and opening breast cancer resource centres in hospitals where poor women can readily access information, encouragement and funds for mammograms, prescriptions, post-mastectomy undergarments and chemotherapy.

Avon's annual Walk Around The World For Breast Cancer raises funds for low budget workstations that train workers in local communities on breast health, self-exams, early detection and the importance of using bras.



Give care from the heart, not pity

Razak Yaacob, the husband of a breast cancer survivor, shares with VIMALA SENEVIRATNE the ups and down of his role as the primary caregiver during her illness

Instead, he bought books and surfed the web for information. The meticulous Razak, who loves cycling and is an instructor in the Japanese martial arts Aikido (his second dan, black belt holder), admits that the responsibility of caring for Nor Azha weighed heavily on his shoulders and he realised he could not do it alone.

"Their two daughters and son, who were then in school, as well as other family members rallied around to help him."

"The first thing I told everyone was that we cannot show pity. Genuine care is where every word and action must come from the heart. The focus should be on caring for her, boosting her morale and getting her mind off her sickness," says the director of a company dealing with X-ray machines. He adjusted his work schedule so that he could

accompany her to chemotherapy sessions and check-ups. He also ferried the children to school and ran errands.

During treatment, he says, there were good days when Nor Azha was full of energy and felt like her old self. But there were also dark and weary days as the residual effects of drugs and pain up. They were not rippled through her body.

"It was like a yo-yo. There were days when I was drained physically, mentally and emotionally but I never showed her that side. She was counting on me to prop her up. I learned to adjust and prayed for strength to get through it."

He learned to take time out for himself. "No point to both of us falling sick," he says. He found exercise therapeutic and would take off an hour to jog on weekends in his racing bicycle.

He kept fit by practicing and teaching Aikido at the Sei Shin Kai Aikido school in Seri Damansara. "It was an opportunity to get out into the fresh air, de-stress and recharge my batteries. Believe me, you need that break. You can't back with a better frame of mind and physical state."

He says he continues with this exercise routine, stands stronger now that his wife has overcome the hurdle. "Frankly, it's the positive attitude, prayer and moral support that helped me get through the rough times."

Nor Azha still undergoes regular medical check-up and does a breast scan annually. "She's back to her normal self. She can outwalk and outrun me now. Oh yes, she is still as grouchy and cranky as ever," he says, throwing back his head in laughter.



Early detection imperative

Breast cancer patients stand the best chance for a cure with early detection, Dr Azlina Firzah Abdul Aziz tells INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL

HER eyes twinkle as she talks about people dearer to her who have breast cancer. Although she deals with cancer patients everyday, Dr Azlina Firzah Abdul Aziz still finds it a little too much to bear to see a breast relative suffer the same fate.

"It's not easy," whispers the consultant breast cancer specialist at the Breast Care Centre in Pantai Hospital, KL, dabbing the corners of her eyes. "It's only a professional's duty when you see that our loved ones have breast cancer."

"What frustrates Azlina is that breast cancer has the best chance for a cure, yet there are still people who leave it too late. They don't understand the importance of early detection," she says with a sigh. "The level of awareness is definitely much better than say, 10 years ago, but we still have women coming in at stage 4, when the cancer has spread to other organs."

Of the total number of female cancer patients in the country, about 30 per cent have breast cancer, reveals the 44-year-old mother of three.

The highest incidence is in Chinese women, particularly those in their 40s and 50s. This is actually a younger age group. For Caucasian women, who have breast cancer is a post-menopausal disease.

"I had my way, I'd have to highlight checking their attention and examining their breasts as soon as they hit puberty," says Azlina, who was previously married to Selwyn Hoang. "I've had patients below 15 years old with benign (non-cancerous) tumours. Although breast cancer rarely happens in those below 20, if they don't know how to check their breasts, they won't know about the changes that can happen."

Early detection saves lives, stresses Azlina. "If they come to us when the lump is below 2cm, stage 1, the chance of survival is almost 100 per cent. When you're already at stage 4, there's no cure. The most you can do is prolong survival time."

She adds, "You can give chemotherapy and drugs to kill the cancer cells but

there are very expensive. Even its government hospitals, they're limited. If you go for chemo, your survival period may run from one to four years, but that depends on where the cancer has spread."

"If it involves the liver and it's chemotherapy, it's tough. If it spreads to the brain, it's worse."

What advice does she have for those living with someone with cancer?

"Get help," she says. "Don't try to cope alone. There are many NGOs like Hospice Malaysia, which can assist. They don't charge for their services and sometimes they'll even loan equipment. If you're somebody in stage 4, you can make a comfortable life for yourself."

For breast cancer survivors, it's important they make the time to join support groups, she adds. "There are many things they can learn to help improve their life. You can cope better if you know how. Don't try to silence."