

Series 3, Episode 5: Cancer as a single parent

Angie Greaves: Being told you have cancer can be life-changing but how do you juggle dealing with your diagnosis as a single parent. [music] Hello. I'm Angie Greaves and welcome to Talking Cancer. A podcast from Macmillan sponsored by our friends over at Boots. This is where I meet and have conversations with real people about living with cancer. I also speak to Macmillan professionals and experts at Boots who share their knowledge and advice to help anyone living with or affected by cancer to live life as fully as they can. In this episode, we're talking cancer with Dee. Dee: It was a very hard time and my son witnessed a lot.

Angie: In May 2019, just days before her son's third birthday, [unintelligible 00:00:55] also known as Dee was diagnosed with breast cancer. One evening after watching a breast cancer awareness program on TV, Dee checked her breasts and found a lump.

Dee: That program then made me think, "Oh, let me just check my breasts just to check and see."

Angie: I'll be talking to Dee about her cancer diagnosis and how she dealt with it as a single mother. Dee: He was very young at the time. I didn't actually tell him that I had breast cancer.

Angie: We'll also be hearing from Azmina Rose, Macmillan Cancer Support and Information Specialist, the expert guidance on how single parents living with cancer can seek support.

Azmina Rose: The best way that any parent can help to prepare their children is just to be as upfront and open as you can.

Angie: We're Macmillan, and we're Talking Cancer.

[music]

Angie: Dee, welcome. It's absolutely lovely to have you here. Now, what I'd like you to do is talk to me about your life before cancer. What was life like for you back then?

Dee: Life before cancer was very carefree. I was a mother. Well, I am a mother, I should say. I was working, socializing with friends, just a normal living.

Angie: Just doing what a young lady of your age would do. You said you're a mother and you have a little son, don't you? Dee: Yes, I do. Angie: How old is your son?

Dee: My son is now five.

Angie: Okay, Dee. Let's just cut straight to the chase. Do you want to tell me about the diagnosis? Dee: Three days before my son's third birthday. I got the news that I had breast cancer, but I just never thought I would be diagnosed with it. I was watching a program on breast cancer awareness and how to check your breasts and things like that. That program then made me think, "Oh, let me just check my breasts, just to check and see." The next day I checked and whilst I was having my bath and I found a lump.

The thought of cancer never crossed my mind at that time. I just thought, "Oh." I don't even know what I thought, but I just-- Cancer didn't cross my mind.

Angie: Sometimes when women find lumps-- I found a lump in 2019 and it turned out to be something called fat necrosis. It probably didn't figure that it could be?

Dee: No, never.

Angie: Had you checked your breasts before?

Dee: Never. That program that I was telling you about, happened to just stumble upon it. That was the reason why I even checked my breasts. I never ever thought about checking my breasts before that program. Then lo and behold, I found that lump. I called 111 and I was seen the same day and the lady examined my breasts and stuff. She didn't seem worried. Again, I wasn't worried and I think I was supposed to hear back from them within, I think she said two weeks. That was on a Sunday. I got a call on a Monday basically saying, "You need to come in on a Wednesday." I was to see a consultant and then the consultant again examined me, and then she sent me down to the breast care. You know where you have your mammograms and things like that?

Angie: Yes.

Dee: I had an ultrasound done and then I had about nine biopsies taken. I got the call to come in and I went to the hospital by myself because I was like, "It's not cancer." I didn't go with anyone. I actually saw the Macmillan nurse carrying the pamphlets and stuff. In my head, I'm thinking, "Could that be for me? Could that be for the next person?" Then I entered the room and there was about four people in the room. Then that dawned on me. I was like, "Okay, this has to be not the best news because there's four people in the room and they look very serious." My surgeon just cut to the chase. She said, "I'm so sorry. You have breast cancer."

Angie: Let me just ask you before we go about the feelings with that conversation. From the time of discovery to the diagnosis, how long was that roughly?

Dee: I'd say all together probably about 2.5 weeks.

Angie: During that time, the word hadn't actually resonated with you?

Dee: No. Not at all. I had those biopsies-- There was a lump that I felt and then they found two additional lumps, being three altogether. They never said cancer. They just wanted to just be sure and to clear anything out.

Angie: Then you are told that moment. What were your initial thoughts?

Dee: They told me I had breast cancer. After they said breast cancer, I couldn't hear anything else. I just heard breast cancer. I was trying to process everything and then she was just talking to me. Then I just thought about my son. Now, I'm a single parent, and literally, my son relies-- His dad's not really in the picture. My thought was, "Oh my God, I'm going to die. My son, who's going to take care of him when I go?" That's

literally what was on my mind at that time. I couldn't think of anything else. Then I was in hysterics, I couldn't breathe.

Angie: Let's go there. Let's talk about cancer in the Black community. Let's talk about the lack of awareness. Let's talk about, I don't like to say a taboo subject but cancer in the Black community, it's a very different conversation than cancer in the White Caucasian communities. Isn't it?

Dee: Yes. In the first couple of months, I struggled because, again, I didn't find or see anyone that looks like me, and then I found two women. This was maybe I'd say about six months into my treatment now. I found two women who had breast cancer. One of them was the founder of Black Women Rising. She had a blog out at the time, and she was literally voicing her journey through the blog, which I found really helpful. I would message her time to time to just ask things like, "Did your hair drop out, or did you have this type of pain and stuff like that?" Also, I started to write about my journey and just vlog and blog on my Instagram. I struggled so much in the beginning. I didn't want another young black woman or woman to have to struggle the way that I did. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to do it from the very beginning, but my mom was like, "No, don't share your story. We have to keep this within the family." I battled.

Angie: Sometimes, Dee, as much as we love family and as much as we want to be, I'm going to use the word loyal to family. Sometimes, we have to go outside of the family unit to get the support we need. Did you find that?

Dee: 100%? I had to just phase out the advice. When you're diagnosed with something like cancer, everybody wants to send you notes. This doctor said this. Take this supplement. Don't have sugar. Do this, do that, don't do this, don't do that, and it's just so overwhelming. I literally found myself having to just block everyone out respectfully, and just do it my way.

Angie: You talked about using Instagram and I'm probably as I said a little bit older than you. I find that some areas of social media can be quite unkind, but when used properly, when used to enhance, when used to encourage, it can be an amazing, amazing channel.

Dee: I got a lot of support when I shared my story. A lot of people didn't know what I was going through because I was still happy-go-lucky, smiling. A lot of people were surprised, they were shocked. When I did end up telling my story, I got a lot of love and support and a lot of women came forward. Basically saying that because of my story, they checked their breasts and if anything, I think that would be the main reason why I wanted to do it. Just so that people are aware of their bodies and take this thing seriously. Early detection can save a life. If me telling my story has helped someone save their life, then I've done what I've needed to do.

Angie: Are you more aware of your body being a temple and it needs to be taken care of?

Dee: Definitely. You know what? Stress.

Angie: The silent killer.

Dee: Prior to me getting diagnosed, I was in a very abusive relationship and I held in so much. As a black woman, we-- I think there are certain topics that are not-- You don't want to talk about. Being in such a relationship like that, I used to hold face, used to act like everything was okay. It wasn't. I was holding in a lot. It was a very hard time for me.

Angie: Dee, your treatment, you've told us about the diagnosis, and thank you very much for being so open and so detailed about it all. Now, the treatment, when did that start and how did that impact you? My understanding is that after chemo and radiotherapy, it can physically wipe you out. Now you've got a toddler, how did that impact your family dynamic with you and your son?

Dee: I had triple positive HER2 breast cancer and I was told it was an aggressive type and fast-growing. The plan was to have a mastectomy, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy. I ended up having chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I didn't have the mastectomy. They did take some of the tissue out of my breast. My breasts are no longer the same size but I still have my breast, which I am grateful for. I had all of that and it was so hard. I think the chemo aspect was so hard because my son at the time, he was two going on three. He still couldn't speak well. I could tell that he was struggling but because he wasn't vocal, I didn't know how I could help him. I didn't know how he was feeling. I knew it was affecting him because his behavior at nursery changed. I luckily had friends and family who would help me, take me to my appointments, help me pick my son up from nursery when I was tired. Helped me cook, clean the house. It was a very hard time and my son witnessed a lot. He saw everything first-hand. When I couldn't get out of bed, when I was throwing up, when I was losing my hair.

Angie: Dee, your son obviously saw mommy being a bit weak, mommy throwing up. Did you say to your son, "Mommy is unwell," or did you actually tell your son exactly what was going on? Because he was very young.

Dee: Yes, he was very young at the time. I didn't actually tell him that I had breast cancer. I did tell him that mommy is unwell, mommy has to have a lot of rest. The nursery actually made a book and in the book, it had a picture of myself, the hospital where I was being seen at. It basically told a story because my son likes to read as well. It told a story of his mom being sick. The nurses, doing what they can to make mommy feel better and strong again. That was my way of explaining to him what I was going through.

Angie: Between yourselves and the nursery, you found a way to let your son know mommy is not too well but you didn't go right in with that word, which I've always hated.

Dee: No, I didn't tell him the word. We literally read the book to him every single night. I think it was one of his favorite books. [chuckles] "Mommy, can we read that book about the hospital again?" If it wasn't for that book, I don't think he would have had the full understanding of what was going on. It was such a clever way, thinking about it now, on how to tell him. The hardest part was seeing him in pain and not being able to help him. I couldn't help him. I wanted to get him some form of support, play therapy, something, but there was nothing for his age group. I was literally stuck.

Angie: Also, at that age, Dee, their colors, they're doing their vocabulary, they're doing water play, they're—

Dee: Fun stuff.

Angie: It must have been-- I don't know if frustrating is the right word because at two years of age going three, he's such a sponge. To see other children having water play, doing [unintelligible 00:16:01], and he's seeing mommy's reactions to chemo. It must have been-- I'm going to use the word traumatizing. Do you see results of that time now even though he's five?

Dee: Yes. He's very shy and sometimes closed in. I actually went to the school and basically told them that look, I'm worried about my son, not academically but emotionally. The school actually recognized it also. They're doing this-- it's like therapy but they act out their feelings and things like that. They actually put him forward for that which I was grateful for because I was like the fact that they've actually noticed it before me even telling them about it was just amazing to me. I was so grateful for it because I was just stuck. A part of me even feels guilty because I couldn't do what I needed to do as a mom for him emotionally. I felt and still feel guilty for not being able to support him in that way. That's been one of my challenges.

Angie: How is your relationship with your son now? I know you have your own emotional issues and I know you were saying that you can still see a few effects from what's happened in the past with your son. How's your relationship with him today?

Dee: We are thick as thieves. That is my baby. That is my handbag. If you see me, you see him. If you see him, you see me. Our relationship is so much more. It's so close. It's literally unbreakable. He's the most caring, I'm not just saying this because he's my son but genuinely, anyone that meets him just has nothing but kind things to say about him. The teachers, "Oh, he's so loving. He's a pleasure to have around." He'll randomly come up to people, strangers sometimes, and just give hugs. He's just so loving. Our relationship is just the best.

Angie: I was going to ask you, as awful as your experience must have been especially in the early days, having gone through the treatment, the ups, the downs, you name it. Coming out the other side, has it enriched your relationship with your son?

Dee: Oh, 1000%. It really has. Not that I took life for granted but I treasure it so much more now. Even when I'm feeling my most tired, I still try and just do the littlest thing. Even if it's just sitting on the sofa and watching a movie with my son and just tickling him. Just the littlest things. I don't take it for granted anymore.

Angie: What advice would you give any single parents who have been diagnosed with cancer?

Dee: Don't be hard on yourself. I think that's the easiest thing, to just feel guilty that you're not doing enough. I would advice not to be hard on yourself. Children are so innocent. It doesn't take a lot to please them. The littlest thing can just make them happy. Don't be hard on yourself and just enjoy the moment. It's easier said than done and there will be challenges and stuff, but just live in that moment.

Angie: It's been a pleasure talking to you and I admire your strength.

Dee: I'm learning each day is a new day. Each day, I say to myself, we're gonna do better than yesterday.

Angie: Dee, thank you so much.

Dee: Thank you, Angie.

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Speaker 4: Questions about cancer. Boots and Macmillan are by your side from the moment you're diagnosed, through your treatment, and beyond. Our Boots Macmillan information pharmacists are on hand with specialist support from helping you make sense of your diagnosis to advice about living with cancer. You can now access this specialist cancer support at every Boots pharmacy in the UK. Visit boots.com/macmillan for more information. Subject to pharmacist availability.

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Angie: Hello to Azmina, our resident Macmillan Support. Now I've just spoken to Dee, and it was about her experience as a single mum with cancer. We know that cancer can be hugely disruptive to people's day-to-day lives, going to treatment, going to appointments. How can single parents prepare their children for this change?

Azmina: The best way that any parent, regardless of whether you're a single parent or not, can help to prepare their children is just to be as upfront and open about the changes as you can. If for example, the routine that the hospital needs you to keep whilst you're going through treatment means that you're no longer able to drop your child at school in the morning, or perhaps not able to pick them up in the afternoon, the best thing you can do is just to explain that in advance, and tell them as clearly as you can about who will be dropping them or picking them up. Generally, children are very adaptable and very resilient. As long as they're clear on the changes that are going to happen, they're generally okay with the changes.

Angie: What support is available for single parents who have been diagnosed with cancer?

Azmina: There are all kinds of different types of support available out there for single parents who have cancer. There's practical support, there are different types of emotional support and there's also financial support. A lot does actually depend on the situation that the person is in and their own circumstances. What I would recommend is if you are a single parent, please do reach out to your clinical team, talk to your cancer nurse specialist, your oncologist, your surgeon, or if there is a Cancer Support Center in your local hospital, then pop down there and have a chat to a professional who's somebody like me. Find out what your specific options are because a lot of the support is local and so it does depend whereabout you live. A lot also depends on your circumstances, but please do ask the question, what support is out there for me?

Angie: Azmina, what kind of support would a single parent receive if they're juggling work with the diagnosis? How can people ask their family or their friends to support if they are struggling?

Azmina: For people who are managing to keep working through their cancer treatment, there are different options. One of the ones we would really recommend that you discuss with your employer, and we can support you with this, is to have a conversation about flexible working. Flexible working can mean either changing your working hours or changing the types of work that you're doing. That can help you to still keep a job, particularly if that's very important to you. Your work is something you love or something that financially, you need to do but it can help you to juggle, work with your responsibilities as a parent, and also, the demands that cancer treatment can place on your time.

Angie: Are there activities that people can do with their children even when they're not feeling their best during treatment?

Azmina: Absolutely. If you're having a type of cancer treatment that is making you feel very tired, then you may feel really bad and guilty that you're not running around the playground with your kids at 90 miles an hour, but actually, kids can enjoy sitting home with you snuggling up on the sofa, watching a really good movie, or playing a board game or a computer game. If you are, for example, struggling with your energy levels, then by all means choose activities that you can manage because your children will absolutely still enjoy them.

Angie: It must be a struggle as a single parent financially. What financial support is available from Macmillan for single parents?

Azmina: If you're a single parent, there are different types of financial support available. There's one option that comes directly from Macmillan as a cancer charity, which is a grant. It's a one-off single payment that can help you with extra costs, for example, extra childcare costs. There are some eligibility criteria for the grant. Talk to your nurse or talk to your doctor or ring the Macmillan Support Line to find out more about that. Then the other big source of help to single parents who are going through cancer treatment actually comes from the government via the benefits system. The benefits system is super complicated and generally requires a lot of form filling, whether that's online or paper. Actually, Macmillan can really help you with that. We have financial support experts on our support line, and they can help you to apply for all of the government help that you could be entitled to, whether that's extra benefits, or whether that's some tax credit. What I would say is, please don't try to navigate the complexities all on your own. Reach out to Macmillan, because we have experts who can make light work of applying for benefits on your behalf.

Angie: Sounds like an amazing support system that you have there on many, many levels. Azmina, getting a cancer diagnosis can be incredibly difficult and lonely, particularly if you are a single parent. Where can they go for emotional support and support for their mental health?

Azmina: Angie, you're right. What we hear is that it can be a very lonely and a very difficult experience to go through a cancer diagnosis and cancer treatment as a single

parent. Macmillan is always here, we have our free Cancer Support Line that's there 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM, seven days a week. I mentioned that it's seven days a week because what I hear from the single parents who come to me for advice is that sometimes, the weekend can actually be the hardest part, Saturdays, particularly Sunday evenings. As much as your clinical team, your nurses, and doctors will be there for you during the week, we know that the nurses aren't always available at the weekend. The Macmillan online community and the Macmillan Support Line are there. Other organizations that we recommend are places like Gingerbread, which specializes in supporting single parents. It does seem to help to talk to other parents who are going through what you're going through because as well as the loneliness and isolation, what I tend to see more so with single parents than coupled parents is this sense of guilt. Guilt about not being able to be the best parent that you can be because of your cancer treatments. That seems to happen regardless of whether somebody planned to be a single parent, or just found themselves being a single parent. The one thing that no parent has ever planned for is to get a cancer diagnosis and have to go through cancer treatments. I would say to anybody who's listening, if you are a single parent and if you do find yourself struggling, whether your mood is low, whether you're feeling tearful, whether you're feeling lonely, or even if you're feeling okay but you just feel like sharing with somebody, please do reach out. Being a single parent is difficult enough at the best of times. Being a single parent with cancer is like a double whammy. It's too much to go through alone. Please, do reach out. Please, don't feel even one second feel like you're letting your child down or letting yourself down if you do need to reach out for help.

Angie: Azmina, thank you as always for your invaluable guidance and your support.

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Angie: What a story. Huge thanks to Dee for sharing her story, and to Azmina for her expert advice. Now, for more information about what we've talked about in today's episode and for more information about how to donate, please visit our website www.macmillan.org.uk/podcast. I am Angie Greaves, Talking Cancer is the Macmillan Cancer Support podcast.

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