

# No One Should Have to Face Cancer Alone

Instagram, commercials, magazines, billboards, and department store windows – Just a few of the places in our country where women are comparing themselves to the so-called ‘standard’ of beauty. Several celebrities have spoken out against the use of photoshopping, acknowledging that it adds to body shaming and a false sense of what our culture finds attractive. But what about the mirror in our own home? What does a woman with cancer do when she sees the reflection of her new body, altered after treatment? What does she feel when she looks at her scars from surgery, redness from radiation, total hair loss from chemotherapy, weight gain/loss? Does she recognize this new person in the mirror and compare her to the woman she was before cancer? Who is helping her with this emotional adjustment? Who is giving her encouragement that she is still beautiful inside and out?



Women with a trauma history could be even more vulnerable during this process, which in turn results in self-esteem taking a deeper hit. This is where support groups and individual counseling can be extremely helpful. Our belief is that **no one should have to face cancer alone**. Being surrounded by accepting, nonjudgmental people makes a significant difference in the emotional healing process. In our monthly support groups, the topic of body image is often in the dialogue. Some of our members are learning how their body is responding to touch as they rediscover their needs for intimacy. They are dealing with these scary, intimidating feelings while possibly also working through guilt, shame, fear of rejection, discomfort, anxiety and depression. Our goal is to help give these women an opportunity to reframe those negative thoughts as their body image is restored. By participating in our gentle movement classes, they can improve their sense of balance and gain deeper connectedness to their sense of identity and femininity.

“Will I lose my hair?” is a common question women ask about side effects. This concern can be strong, as a woman’s hair is often such a noticeable attribute. The American Cancer Society offers two free programs that assist women with their appearance during active cancer treatment. Their free wig salon provides a turban, new wig, and liner to survivors experiencing hair loss. Cancer Support Community of the Greater Lehigh Valley is proud to announce that we are another local site for private wig fitting appointments. We also are a host site for Look Good Feel Better®, which is more than just a make-up class. Program Manager Jennifer Washney describes how women learn about skin care techniques, color, and wig care. Equally as important, they develop friendships and receive validation from other survivors who share this common experience. Instructors notice that women’s spirits are lifted when they leave this program! This boost to self-esteem helps women repair a positive body image at a time when they might be very vulnerable and overwhelmed.



For breast cancer survivors, another time when feelings about body image can become overwhelming is after a mastectomy or lumpectomy. Because the surgical process has become very streamlined, some women may feel emotionally rushed and unaware of all of their options. Teena Bloss, one of Hartzell’s Pharmacy’s Certified Mastectomy Fitters with over 25 years of experience, works to change that. When asked what she loved most about her job, Teena replied, “It’s the smiles ... and the cries of joy.” She’s referring to the transformation that she sees once women realize that they can feel feminine again. To many, that means being symmetrical with the help of a prosthesis.

Teena notices many women enter the fitting room without hope, unable to look at their appearance from a positive point of view. This shows how impactful breast cancer surgery is on a woman’s self-esteem. For Teena, seeing women treated with respect is of utmost importance. She wants to make sure women are reminded, “**This is YOUR body. It’s important to be happy when looking at yourself.**” The decision about post-op and prosthetic products is up to the women. At Hartzell’s Pharmacy, they take time to educate women on their options, making them aware of insurance coverage and taking time during their appointment to ensure that they feel comfortable enough to make an informed choice. After time talking, hugging, laughing, crying, and playing dress up, the end result is always the same... relief!



**For more information on ways to cope with body image issues, cancer survivors are welcome to join Teena and our clinical social work team on October 27th at 6:30pm at our facility, 944 Marcon Blvd, Suite 110, Allentown, PA. Together, we are offering support for survivors as they rebuild a positive body image.**

**Resources mentioned in this article:**

- American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- Cancer Support Community Greater Lehigh Valley 610-861-7555 or [www.cancersupportglv.org](http://www.cancersupportglv.org)
- Hartzell’s Pharmacy and Medical Equipment in Catasauqua, PA 484-240-6428 or [www.hartzells.com](http://www.hartzells.com)