

No one should go through cancer alone.

Marian Vallotton shares her personal cancer journey



On a hot July evening in 2016, I went to a nearby emergency room because I was experiencing discomfort in my chest. Hours later, I was told that I had thymic carcinoma, a cancer affecting a small organ just above the heart.

Just like that, I could see the life I cherished coming to a premature end. I was overwhelmed with anxiety, including the fear that I would not share in my daughter's graduation from high school. Amid the clamor of a busy hospital, I could hear only my racing heartbeat.

This wasn't my first bout with cancer, however. It was my fourth.

Roughly 9,000 people in the Greater Philadelphia Area are newly diagnosed with cancer each year, and most of them inevitably have a similar reaction. The emotional burdens the disease imposes on a patient, along with their family members and friends, cannot be overstated.

That's why Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia (CSCGP) offers free psychosocial and educational services to people with cancer and those close to them. From diagnosis to treatment and beyond, their licensed mental health professionals facilitate evidence-based counseling and support groups, healthy lifestyle classes and social gatherings for adults and children alike.

In so doing, CSCGP counteracts one of the most insidious aspects of cancer – the self-isolation that often results from anxiety and depression. Human connections and the knowledge we gain from one another are key to the vitality of life, after all. They also contribute to improved health outcomes for people with cancer and promote the emotional wellbeing of those close to them.

Each Monday, I participate in a support group for people with cancer. It's where I lean into my illness, not away from it, to gain the insights and support of others who know firsthand what I'm experiencing. It's also my best opportunity to help others just as they help me.

Support groups are also a source of valuable insights into living with cancer. A member of my group, Jodi, told me about how Ritalin can counterbalance the lethargic effects of chemotherapy. It has proven to be a gamechanger for me.

I also participate in various classes sponsored by CSCGP. I learned to cook traditional Mexican fare with celebrity chef Monica Mannion at Suzanne Morgan Center in Fairmont Park and honed my self-expression through art classes. When confronted by cancer's destructive potential – and treatments that amount to chemical and radiological poison – creative acts are uplifting.

Twice a week, I climb into a dragon boat and paddle the Schuylkill River with a group of breast cancer survivors. Sponsored by [Hope Afloat](#), a CSCGP partner, the excursions provide women with support, camaraderie and adventure, and the knowledge that they can lead active, full lives after a breast cancer diagnosis. This type of upper body exercise also reduces lymphedema in women who have been treated for breast cancer.

There's nothing easy about helping to power a 1,500-pound vessel made of solid teak, especially when I'm weakened by treatment. Still, I never fail to summon the energy to do my part. I don't want to let down my team, but I also derive physical strength from others in the boat. As we cut through the water, I believe that anything is possible.

With the help of my doctors, family, friends and CSCGP, I overcame the thymic carcinoma, but have since been diagnosed with thymoma, a cancer affecting the thymus gland behind the sternum. This is now my fifth bout with cancer. My prognosis is unclear, but I can't not have a positive outlook. It's a gift instilled in me at an early age by my parents.

Viktor Frankel wrote that "life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by a lack of meaning and purpose." Cancer's purpose is unique to each person affected by the disease, but an essential means of discerning that purpose is through community – the insights, experiences and support that come from other people.

Indeed, community is the purpose I've found in cancer. I believe that everything in my life has prepared me to be a resource to those affected by the disease. In addition to being a survivor, I spent the bulk of my career serving as a facilitator, speaker and coach. Being there for others as others have been there for me is my life's work. I couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity.

Marian Vallotton, an author, lives in Devon, PA.