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Coaching Teams . Changing Cultures

Helping Breast Cancer Patients Regain Their Dreams - Teresa Ferreiro

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Most of the time, when I say I once had breast cancer, people let go some sound of discomfort or anxiety. Then, they say something along the lines of: “My friend/my mum/my wife/my... also had it.” And indeed, we have all met someone who had it because one in eight women will have breast cancer at some point in their lives. [Ninety percent](#) of them will still be alive five years later, and yet, we can’t help but think that cancer means death, and that something incredibly horrible is happening to these women (Only 1% of all breast cancer patients are [men](#)). If we do this when we are just listening, imagine your reaction if you are the one hit with this diagnose.

Women who had breast cancer are normally pushed into a whirlpool of emotions that drag them to its center, making them feel that they have lost control of their lives. Friends and family, flying around in that whirlpool, give their opinion of what should be done, often without even being asked. Cancer is, in this sense, somehow like soccer in Europe: It’s so embedded in our daily lives that we all think we know what’s the best thing to do, and we speak up. In addition, some doctors are not great listeners and use a paternalistic approach, deciding (and imposing) a treatment instead of seeking for the patient’s involvement and agreement.

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In this context, women with breast cancer will go through an exhausting treatment that, most of the time, will include surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormone therapy. At some point during this journey, many of them realize that they have lost their self-confidence and their direction. They try to reallocate the pieces of their lives, but they no longer know how. *What is it that really matters now? What will the future unveil? How am I going to move forward?* These are some of the questions that echo inside their heads and souls.

Patient coaching offers them a safe environment and the tools to regain their power and their self-confidence, to rediscover their dreams and take back their lives. We meet them where they are and accompany them on their way out. These women are not fragile or weak. An ear to listen to their story or a shoulder to cry on are no longer enough. They want tools that help them improve and recover, so they can occupy their own space and become the women they can be.



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Often, they are afraid to let go and allow themselves to believe in their own dreams. They think they don't deserve to be happy or they are just not good enough. But we, coaches, know they do, know they are.

Patients need coaching and tools as much, if not more, as executives and teams do. The fact that they talk about surviving rather than about improving performance or becoming better leaders should not draw us back. At the end of the day, the tools, the coaching and the client's final goals are similar. Patients want to become a better version of themselves and live a more fulfilling life.

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Research shows that after patient coaching, breast cancer survivors are much more satisfied with their lives and with themselves. They claim they have improved in aspects such as:

- *Ability to control their life and their illness:* They are the ones who decide how they want it to be
- *Decision power:* Becoming aware of their strength empowers them and helps them raise their voice and decide
- *Accountability:* They become responsible for their lives, their illnesses and their decisions. They connect with their ability to choose and become protagonists, rather than victims or viewers
- *Stretch their limits:* They learn to leave behind limiting beliefs that prevented them from reaching further objectives and dreams
- *Tolerance:* Towards them and their environment. They learn to live without being so demanding on themselves. They also learn to treat themselves with love

To refer to this type of coaching, we chose to coin the term “patient coaching” rather than naming it “health coaching” because people who are going through a disease share specific problems and needs that differ greatly from those of coachees who seek to improve their health.

The research, the measurements and the theories are indeed key to validate the effectiveness of what we are doing. But beyond them, there are the patients and their words. After coaching, some of them said:

“I was not aware of how valuable I am”

“I have learned to say no”

“I have realized that I have a life to live”



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* This article was first published at the [International Coach Federation \(ICF\) blog](#) in October 2019.

* The research is part of Teresa Ferreiro's PhD thesis, soon to be published.

