

I KEPT MY CANCER A SECRET

These three survivors went to great lengths to keep their diagnosis under wraps. And the reveal was not at all what they had expected. **BY BARBARA BRODY**



“I couldn’t bear the thought of scaring my kids.”

**Maria Baum, 48
Sag Harbor, NY**

Five years ago, a brave, beautiful little girl in our town was diagnosed with cancer and died. Everyone in our community, including my children—13, 10, 7 and 3 at the time—was heartbroken. So when I found out I had breast cancer shortly after her passing, I knew my kids would be terrified. Rather than gently break the news, I decided to shield them from all the fear, anxiety and pain.

As you can imagine, having a lumpectomy was difficult to go through—but it was easy to hide from my children. It was an outpatient procedure, so I wasn’t away from home for long. And if I couldn’t do something, like lift my youngest son, I’d say Mommy’s back hurt or offer another excuse. At that point only my husband and a few very close friends knew what was going on, and I swore them to secrecy. I remember saying, “You cannot even discuss this in *your* house” because if their kids found out, mine would too.

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However, about a month later I needed a second surgery. I had to tell the kids something since I was going to stay overnight at the hospital. The night before I explained to each one as casually and cheerfully as possible—despite the turmoil within me—that I was having a small operation and it was no big deal.

The hardest part was disguising my chemotherapy treatments. For 12 weeks over the summer, while the kids were at day camp or at friends' houses, I'd lie in bed, exhausted. As soon as they were about to come home, I'd put on makeup, brew a cup of coffee and, most important, smile. I tried to be upbeat every minute I was with them. Once they went to bed I'd collapse. Of course, there were times I couldn't find the energy to pretend to be happy. So I'd say, "Mommy has the flu" or "Mommy has food poisoning."

Thankfully, there was one place where I could relinquish my forced cheer and let out all my anger. While I was going through chemo, a friend introduced me to paddleboarding. That summer I mustered up what little energy I had to head to the bay really early in the morning, when no one was around. I'd let loose and cry and scream, and by the time I got home I felt peaceful. Doing something physical felt great—and reinforced my cover story of everything being fine. I imagined my kids thinking, "She can't be sick; she's so active!"

Once I felt stronger, I started thinking about how to protect other women from this disease. In 2012 I founded the Hamptons Paddle & Party for Pink, which benefits the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.



So far we've raised more than \$5 million and I've shared that I'm a survivor with millions of people—including my kids. I told them one by one once my doctor declared me cancer-free, and they join me at the fundraising event every year. I never planned to keep it a secret forever. I just wanted a vibrant and healthy mom to be the one to share it.

"Embarrassment played a role. A few friends had breast cancer, but I didn't know anyone with colon cancer."

—Lisa Palet Goldstein

5 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Sharing Your Diagnosis

- 1 What might hold me back from sharing my status? Is that concern valid?
- 2 What might I gain by sharing my diagnosis?
- 3 What do I stand to lose from going public?
- 4 Are there certain people I would be more comfortable telling than others? Be clear about why and how you might control the flow of information.
- 5 If I limit whom I tell, will I still have enough support?

SOURCE: Katherine Puckett, PhD, national director of mind-body medicine at Cancer Treatment Centers of America

“Having colleagues think I couldn’t pull my weight was not an option.”

**Lisa Palet Goldstein, 49
Nashville, TN**

As a sales rep, I’m well aware that image is everything. So nearly two years ago—after the initial shock of being diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer wore off—I immediately worried about how it would impact my career. Would coworkers think I had become a less valuable employee? Or assume I was no longer capable of bringing in new business? Would my boss over-scrutinize my performance and fire me if my sales numbers started to go down? Rather than potentially jeopardize my job, I decided not to share my situation.

Most of my work is done from home and on the road: I make lots of sales calls, train people who are new to the field, and meet with potential clients several times a week. Nobody watches me clock in and clock out. But keeping my condition under wraps was still tricky.

I needed six weeks of radiation and chemo right away, and the type of chemo I had was infused daily. I had a port in my chest with a tube connecting it to a pump that I wore in a fanny pack. When I had to see clients or coworkers, I’d disguise the equipment by wearing blousy tops instead of my usual tailored suits and jackets. Normally I’d hug people, but instinctively I cringed whenever someone reached out to touch me.

I canceled or postponed lunch meetings to avoid questions about not wanting to eat. I had no appetite, plus

my treatment left me with mouth sores and nausea that sent me running out of the room on a few occasions. I got pretty good about brushing off questions from colleagues and clients; I’d let them think I had food poisoning or a virus.

Somehow, I managed to keep my sales numbers up. But when I needed to schedule surgery to remove part of my colon, I had no choice but to explain my situation. I’d have to go on medical leave and wouldn’t even be able to drive a car. So after months of keeping quiet, I told my boss and coworkers what was going on. No one wants to discuss their bowels—especially not in a professional setting. But when I phoned each person on my team, every single one volunteered to help me

with clients, and many sent meals and bouquets of flowers to my house.

My journey wasn’t easy—I required more chemo after the surgery, my hair thinned out and I lost about 20 pounds. But these days I am cancer-free, have a really good prognosis and am working full-time again. I’m also pretty open with everyone I meet about my ordeal. Since going public I’ve connected deeply with people I never would have met, and I’m now on a mission to warn everyone about the second-most-deadly cancer in the U.S. for men and women. I encourage people to get colonoscopies and tell them what to expect from the process. Colon cancer doesn’t get a lot of attention, but hopefully I’m now a part of changing that.

“I didn’t want anyone to know what I thought I had done to myself.”

**Samantha Mixon, 36
St. Simons Island, GA**

Four years ago, my body sent me a terrifying message that something was horribly wrong. My head started throbbing, my depth perception was suddenly gone and I couldn’t see anything but swirly colors. Then I started vomiting. My mom rushed me to an emergency room, where I had checked in before with lesser headaches. But this was the first time I’d been with her in tow and she insisted they do an MRI. That’s how I learned I had stage 4 lung cancer that had metastasized to my brain.

Once reality set in, embarrassment and guilt took root as I flashed back to my college days. I’d never so much as bought a pack of cigarettes—but a few times a month I’d sneak into a bar with friends and one of them would offer me a smoke. If anyone found out, I was convinced they’d think my getting cancer was fair punishment.

My plan was to hide the truth from nearly everyone, but I was on so many drugs after coming out of brain surgery to remove a tumor that I didn’t do a good job of explaining that to my mom. She told a friend of hers right away, and that person posted on Facebook that she was praying for me. I gasped when I read those words, logged off and handed my phone to my best friend, along with



“We need to stop the stigma around lung cancer. I shouldn’t have felt ashamed to share my story.”

—Samantha Mixon

instructions to tell anyone who asked that I had cancer but not reveal what kind.

Most important, I was determined to keep the details from my then 7-year-old daughter. I made her father (my ex-husband) swear he would never tell her what type of cancer I had died from. In my twisted logic, I thought she would believe I cared more about partying in college than I did about anything in my future, including her.

What finally changed my mind-set was talking to my doctor. He said, “Samantha, you could have smoked a pack a day for 30 years and you wouldn’t have gotten this type of cancer.” It turns out I have a mutation to a gene (called epidermal growth factor receptor, or EGFR) that put me at risk for lung cancer. Maybe I wasn’t to blame after all.

I still couldn’t talk about what was going on without sobbing, but I decided to break my silence by blogging. Two months later, after I knew more about my treatment plan, I sat down with my daughter and said, “I can’t promise I will survive this, but I promise to never give up.” And I don’t break promises. I had four rounds of chest radiation but I continue to take a targeted pill therapy daily. My doctors tell me I’ll keep taking that “chemo pill” until it stops working and we have to try something new.

Meanwhile, I’m determined to make everyone aware that if you have lungs, you can get lung cancer—and we need more funding to fight it. To that end, I’ve been working with a nonprofit called Lung Force to spread the word. Most people don’t know that lung cancer is the number one cancer killer of women and that new cases (even for nonsmokers) and deaths from the disease for women are on the rise. No one deserves this cancer, and survivors shouldn’t be ashamed to share their story.

My daughter is now 11, and my biggest advocate. Recently, her teachers told everyone to wear pink for Breast Cancer Awareness Day at her school. When she wore white instead, the principal approached her and wanted to know why. Her answer: “My mom has lung cancer, and we don’t have Lung Cancer Awareness Day—but we should.”