

THE MALE PERSPECTIVE

Have you ever thought what your first questions would be to a man diagnosed with breast cancer? How does a husband feel when his wife is diagnosed, or how does a young son cope with knowing that his mother has only a short time left to live? Chances are that men and women will not ask the same things. **Wendy Granditer** and **Daniel Fryer** both talk to three men about their first-hand experience and highlight the different approaches to the same subject

Every year 33,000 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in the UK. It is not just the person who is diagnosed whose world is turned up-side down but those of their family and friends. Considered a woman's disease, it is often easy to forget the implications and effects of breast cancer for men, as partners, parents, children and friends and in one per cent of cases, the one to be diagnosed.

David Morgan, 59, discovered his wife, Mavis, had breast cancer in 1991. She had a mastectomy the same year. Now he acts as a trained partner volunteer for Breast Cancer Care.

Danny: How did you feel when you first found out?

David: When Mavis was diagnosed with breast cancer, my first reaction was: She's going to die. That's all I knew about cancer, that it was death and suffering. I didn't really take it in at first, for days I just felt shell-shocked. But we did talk about it, we didn't cut each other off, and that was very important.

Danny: Were you at all worried that you might not find her attractive after the mastectomy?

David: Well, we'd been married for 21 years when we found out, and our relationship had always been very strong. I know lots of women worry about how their partner will feel about them physically after a mastectomy, but I can honestly say that it never once crossed my mind. All I thought about was the fact that I might lose Mavis.

Danny: How supportive do you think you were?

David: I'm a Merchant Navy engineer and luckily I was on leave, so I was able to take care of the day to day running of the house while Mavis was in hospital. But it was extremely hard to keep up this front that everything was fine. I wanted to seem like I was coping, because then the patient copes better too, but it really took its toll in the end, because nobody was there to tell me that everything would be alright.

Danny: How did you, as a man, cope with it?

David: I felt very isolated because I had no one to talk to. We had a friend who was a GP, but even he was reluctant to discuss it. You could almost see the invisible barriers going up when you mentioned it to people. Women are always quick to seek out support, but for men it's much harder – we 'll talk about anything except how we feel. Luckily I became involved with some support groups like Breast Cancer Care and that's helped me a lot.

Danny: Did you at any point think 'why me'?

David: Of course things went through my mind, 'why us?' and 'why my wife?' but you've got to talk yourself through that. If you carry along on that train, you're going to end up with problems. The thing to do is accept it, accept that your wife has breast cancer and go on from there.

Danny: How has it all affected your lives now?

David: Amazingly, having to deal with this hasn't made me look at life that differently, but I certainly don't take anything for granted anymore, and neither does Mavis. She was always active but now she's proactive; she really lives life to the full. It makes you realise that you don't know what's around the corner. Breast cancer has taught us both a lot, and it's made us value each other and life in a way we never did before.

Wendy: Where were you when your wife was diagnosed?

David: Thankfully, I was with her. The local GP found a lump, sent her down for a biopsy and we both went in for the results. When we were told it was malignant, I was frightened out of my wits. To me cancer is death, a long painful death. Our cosy little world had suddenly come to an abrupt end.

Wendy: How did Mavis take the news?

David: She's a physiotherapist, very hospital-orientated so her knowledge was better than mine, but not a lot better with regards to cancer. She was frightened witless as well. Until you know any better, cancer is horrifying.

Wendy: Did you talk about the treatment and its consequences?

David: We didn't really know much at first so we began by supporting each other and finding out as much as we could about it. Then we were given various options about treatment, including a mastectomy, which is what she opted for.

Wendy: How did you feel that she chose to have a mastectomy?

David: This was my wife. The fact that she was having her breast removed didn't mean anything to me. You marry someone for the ▶

whole person, not just for their body. I just wanted her to stay alive and feel no pain.

Wendy: How did you tell the children, and how did they take it?

David: At the time our son was nine and our daughter was 18. Mavis couldn't bring herself to tell them the news, so the onus was on me. I decided they had a right to know everything, including the fact that she could die, and they took it very well. In retrospect telling them was the least difficult thing we had to face.

Wendy: Has it made you appreciate life more?

David: Very much so. When you're confronted with the possibility of losing your partner you come down to earth with a bump. You realise how much you've taken for granted. It made me appreciate what she had been doing all these years, so it definitely pulled us closer together.

Wendy: What advice would you give another man in a similar situation to you?

David: It helps to talk to someone who has been through it so they can see there is hope. I've seen husbands crack up under the strain of trying to look after their wife, bring up the children, do the housekeeping and hold a job down. I thought the end of my world had come, but together, you can get through it.

Stephen Wilshire, 75, was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago. His daughter died of breast cancer nine years ago, as did his mother when he was eleven. He trained as a volunteer for Breast Cancer Care

Danny: What were your first thoughts when you were told you had breast cancer?

Stephen: Because I'd lost my mother and a daughter to breast cancer, I'd always been aware of the possibility that I might get it too. So when I found a lump and they told me it was cancer, I wasn't very surprised.

Danny: Where you worried about treatment and the side-effects?

Stephen: The treatment was much the same for me as it is many women, just less extensive. They removed my breasts, took away the lymph nodes under the arms and put me on radiotherapy for three weeks, and I was also put on Tamoxifen to reduce the chances of it coming back.

Danny: Was your ability to still be an active male a concern?

Stephen: As a man, you could say that if you're going to have cancer it's probably the best spot to get it, because compared to cancer of the liver, or the bowel, it's a lot less invasive. It's much more stressful for women, because lots of cosmetic and emotional issues come into it, and the cancer tends to be much more deeply treated.

I think I would have found it a lot harder to deal with had I been a younger man with a new family, because I would have had to consider leaving them while they were young.

Danny: How did your friends and family react when you told them?

Stephen: Friends have been fine but the worst aspect is definitely the genetic side - the thought that you might pass it on to children and grandchildren is very traumatic. We've all had to consider genetic testing, and make tough decisions. My eldest daughter, Susan, has been tested and is in the clear, and so are her two daughters. My son isn't married, and he doesn't want to be tested unless he has to think about having a family and there's a possibility that he could pass it on. My youngest daughter spent a great amount of time considering whether she should or shouldn't be tested and she's decided against it - she's not sticking her head in the sand, she just feels that she's more comfortable not knowing and dealing with it only if it happens.

Danny: Is it hard to stay positive through all this?

Stephen: Well, what can you do about it? You can't just roll over and give up; you have to look at the positive side don't you? It is a dreadful killer, but a lot of people with breast cancer do recover. The main thing is that I'm alive today, and I have a wonderful family.

Wendy: Given your family history were you better prepared, do you think, when you were told?

Stephen: I suppose I was really. When I found a lump on my breast I saw the doctor, who referred me to a specialist. The results of the biopsy came through three days later. When they told me it was malignant and needed to be removed I was shocked, but not completely gobsmacked. I'd had a feeling that it was cancer. The incidence of breast cancer in males is very small. In the UK, 200 men a year contract it and around 90 die. It's not an epidemic or anything, so I looked at it very positively. It's not like it was internal. After treatment it was for me to cross my fingers and hope the bugger didn't come back.

Wendy: How did you feel about having your breast removed?

Stephen: I wasn't worried at all. I'm fairly philosophical about these things. So I joked with the nurses about my prosthesis and kept a deadpan face. I go swimming and don't wear a full costume. No one's ever said 'what's happened to you?' If they did, I'd be happy to talk about it. I think one of the dreadful things about cancer is people only talk about it with baited breath. That can only make people more scared than they should be.

Wendy: So how did others react when you told them?

Stephen: When I was diagnosed I told my neighbours what had been discovered. I didn't like the thought of people chatting away on the corner and then stopping as I approached. Reactions were very positive. I think the neighbours took their cue from me and thought, 'Hell, if he hasn't worried very much, why should we?' The family were concerned, but very supportive.

Wendy: Has the treatment or having your breast removed affected your sex-life?

Stephen: The treatment has some side effects like putting on weight, itching and so forth but I don't don't recall any of the doctors saying 'It might decrease your sexual activity,' but it's an oestrogen blocker so it should. I'm not as sexually active now as I was ten years ago, but that would've probably been the case anyway. Like all cancers, early diagnosis is highly desirable. If you have it, be positive, keep your fingers crossed and get on with your life.

Willem Botha, 15, lost his mother to breast cancer in September 1998. He's now organising a charity ball in her memory.

Danny: When your mother was diagnosed, how soon was it before she told you?

Willem: I knew that Mum had been going to the doctor a lot for check ups, but she never let on that it might be cancer until the day they got the tests back. Then Dad sat me and my younger brother and sister down and explained what had happened: that they'd found a lump and it was cancerous and that Mum would need a mastectomy. Although I was only about 12 at the time, I knew how serious it could be. My Nan had died from cancer, and only a year earlier Mum had lost one of her close friends to breast cancer. But they were both very optimistic about Mum's chances, because they'd caught it early. ▷

Danny: How did you feel?

Willem: At first I just kept asking myself why it was happening to us, I wondered if we were being punished for something. I didn't talk about it with my parents or my brother and sister, because I knew they had enough to deal with without me getting upset, but I did discuss it with friends at school and my mum and dad's friends were really supportive as well. But I kept my deepest fears – that I was going to lose my mum – bottled up. I think I was under the misguided impression that if I didn't talk about it, it would go away.

Danny: What did you think when your mum went into hospital for the operation?

Willem: After the operation the doctors were confident that they'd got all of the cancer. For a while everything seemed fine. But then a few months later she went back for another scan and they discovered that the cancer had spread to her liver and her bones. She got very ill very quickly after that and about two weeks before the end she had to go into hospital. Her liver had really swollen up, and at that point my dad told us that they weren't going to do anymore for her, they were going to send her home so that she could die peacefully.

Danny: How did you feel about this decision?

Willem: I tried to stay positive but when she died my first reaction was to blame the doctors – I was angry with them for not doing more. Then I got angry with myself, thinking that there must have been something more I could have done. But now, a year on, I've stopped trying to blame.

Danny: How do you feel about it all now?

Willem: I'm trying to put my feelings about the whole thing in focus, and even see a positive side. Towards the end when Mum was bed-ridden, I spent more time with her than I ever had before. I think I benefited from that, because we became closer than we'd ever been. I had to make the most of the time I had with her.

Wendy: When you discovered your mother had breast cancer were you confused or embarrassed because of where the cancer was?

Willem: I was scared at first but not really embarrassed about it as some of my friends at school had been through similar things, so they understood what was going on and were able to support me. I think I kept a lot of anxiety to myself.

Wendy: Did you talk about it with your brother and sister?

Willem: We were all trying to deal with it in our own ways really. Mum and Dad were always open about it. They would always keep us up-to-date on the medical side of things and always said we could talk, but we didn't really talk about it much.

Wendy: How did it affect your relationship with your mother while going through all this?

Willem: Throughout Mum's cancer, the whole time, she always had a brave face and was always there for us, no matter how bad she felt. She always had a smile on her face. Towards the end, she had to stay in bed for a lot of time, so I think she became more available to me, especially if I wanted to go and talk about anything. In that respect, we became much closer. We knew how bad things were about two or three weeks before she died. She went back into hospital to have what the doctors thought was fluid pumped out of her stomach, but it turned out to be her liver, which was badly swollen. She was kept in for about a week, then sent home so that she could die with her family. That's when I really knew, that's when it hit home.

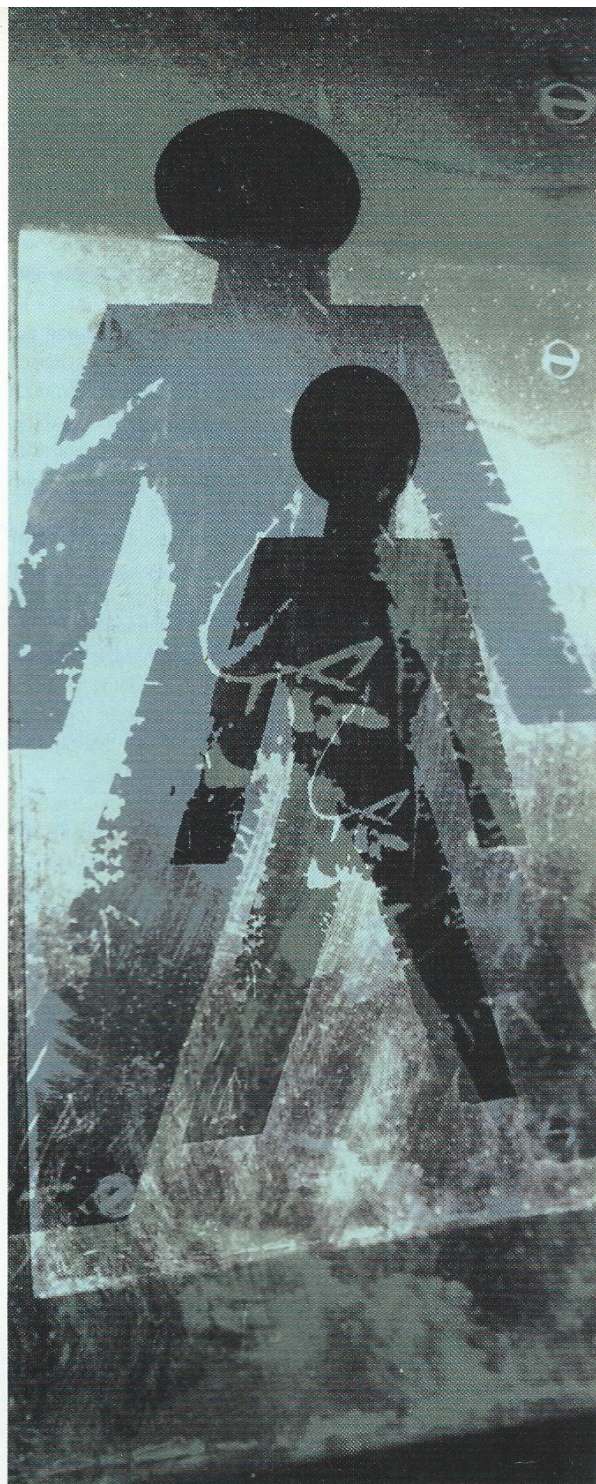
Wendy: How has her death changed your outlook on life?

Willem: I'm trying to see the positive in everything now. I've been arranging a charity ball for the Breast Cancer Campaign, in my mothers' memory. Through that, I've been able to talk about what happened more openly, which has helped me get over it quite a lot. It's been good having a lot of people around to support me.

Wendy: Has this deep loss brought your family even closer?

Willem: Yes, definitely. I think Dad still relies quite heavily on the three of us to support him at times, but I don't really know how to help him. It's hard. I think, that if this happens to you, you should make the most of the time you've got left with your mother. Be there for her, and be grateful for every moment you have.

If you would like to talk to someone who has had breast cancer or whose partner has, call Breast Cancer Care's free helpline on 0808 800 6000 □



Daniel Fryer is a freelance journalist and has worked for several magazines and newspapers, including, FHM, The Face and Time Out.

Wendy Granditer is a freelance journalist specialising in teenage and women's issues. She's contributed to several magazines including, 19, B, Shine, Prima and Sugar, for which she also writes a monthly advice column.

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