

LOVING OUR BALD SELVES

by Susan Beausang

If we can face life's challenges feeling good about ourselves, we can often meet those challenges with more clarity, more determination, and more understanding. At no time is such love of self more important than when fighting cancer. Yet many women find their love of self becomes compromised by the emotions stirred when they find a bald, "sick-looking" person staring back at them in the mirror. Even women who rise above self-deflating thoughts must guard against the public stares, looks of pity, and unsolicited comments that remind them that they visually represent cancer, simply because they lack hair.

As our awareness of the relationship between emotional well-being and



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Well-meaning friends and family may minimize or dismiss their feelings, wrongly assuming that it is a somehow separate and less traumatic issue than the cancer itself. As a result, women may suffer in isolation and be made to feel vain, guilty, or out of touch with what matters most, if they express their emotions or show their true grief. Before a woman loses her hair to chemotherapy, she will often put much of her energy into maintaining a sense of normalcy

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physical healing grows, cancer care is gradually expanding to include emotional and appearance support. Nonetheless, there is still very little real understanding of the emotional impact of medical hair loss. Without hair, many women feel stripped of their identity and femininity, making it even more difficult to maintain the sense of positive optimism that is so important for healing. Those women need to know that hiding is neither the only option nor the best option. Women who lose their hair during chemo want to continue living, not just coping.

Among those women who lose their hair due to chemotherapy, some consider it the least of their worries, insignificant, or even liberating. Women's responses are as diverse as the women themselves. Some women find it to be one of the most (or even *the* most) difficult aspect of cancer. Those women find little or no resources to assist them in dealing with the emotions triggered by hair loss, and they have little time and energy to seek out those resources or support.

for the benefit of loved ones, especially children. Many women find it is their hair loss that pushes their parents, partners, and children over the edge with fear.

Rather than face the emotional side of chemo-induced hair loss alone, women need more understanding, more resources, and more options for coping with the drastic assault on their self-esteem that often accompanies hair loss. Because there is no "one size fits all" means of addressing women's emotions, the first step is to acknowledge the fact that hair loss can be of deep emotional significance to women. When women find comprehensive emotional understanding and support for coping with cancer-related hair loss, the healing journey will be that much easier.

Editor's Note: Susan Beausang, president of *4women.com*, is a "previvor," having had a prophylactic double mastectomy and ovaries removed after learning she was a BRCA2 gene carrier and had a lifetime 85 percent chance of developing breast cancer. She also has Alopecia universalis, an autoimmune disease that causes complete scalp and bodily hair loss. ■