

Breast Cancer, Burnout and the Key to Healthy Living

City stockbroker
turned kick-ass
health coach

**Sandie
Fredriksson**

was just 44 when
she found the
lump on her breast.



She tells Frank how
this life shock opened
her eyes to the way
she was living, and
took her from
stressed to strong.

“I’m sorry to tell you, but you do have breast cancer.”

The words sent me into a tailspin. Tears rolled down my face as I imagined my twin boys trying to navigate life without me. They had only just turned 11, for crying out loud. I was a divorced single mother, and while my children have a great relationship with their dad, I have always been the one providing for them financially. I started silently pleading with God, the Universe - anyone that was listening, just let me get my kids to 25. Just give me some time to shape them and get them on their way.

It took me over an hour to find the strength to leave the Harley Street Clinic. The staff kept bringing tea and tissues and asking if I was ok, but I wasn't registering any of it. I sat there, blindsided, already mourning my unfinished life, too petrified to step out the door and let breast cancer become my new reality.

Heading for burnout

I'd been juggling a punishing schedule for far too long and it felt like I was paddling hard to stay in control. Give me a problem and I would find a solution, show me a wreckage and I'd have a disaster recovery plan on the table within no time. I was moving through life at warp speed giving little thought to how that might be affecting my health. And when it came to my kids, I was highly skilled at ensuring their lives ran smoothly. From piano lessons to playdates to entrance exams for the top London schools; I had it all covered.

Work was tough. The banking industry was in decline thanks to regulation overload and rapid advancements in technology, however, I'd had a successful 20 years as a stockbroker and it was all I knew. I was relentlessly ambitious and prepared to fight hard for my career... but I was also utterly exhausted.

Like so many other mothers I know, self-care was just a footnote on my to-do list. The absence of healthy habits in my daily routine had left me with a toxic lack of balance. I grabbed food when I could (organic, of course), considered exercise to be a luxury (despite a drawer of gorgeous Sweaty Betty outfits) and I rarely took the supplements I'd spent a fortune on. I was a prisoner to the fatigue caused by my 5:30am alarm clock and I looked forward to the end of every day when I would crawl into bed and treat myself to Netflix.

My strategy to avoid burnout? It was pretty simple - keep my fingers crossed and hope to dodge that bullet. I was taking it for granted that my body would cope. That strategy failed me miserably. I thought there would be plenty of time to focus on myself once the kids were older and I could wind down my career. But I was wrong. Now here I was, being told that I might not have plenty of time after all.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer at 44 was my rock bottom. The ultimate kick in the pants. The warning I needed to pay attention to my health. I spent hours analysing my lifestyle choices. Should I have paid more attention to nutrition? Would a consistent exercise regime have stopped me getting cancer? Was I more stressed than I realised? I was spiralling. Why me? What was I doing wrong? How long had this disease been nipping at my heels?

I guess I'll never know the answer to that, but what I do know is that I had let myself lose control of my lifestyle habits and my own wellbeing.

"The food we eat, how active we are and how much we weigh are all things that influence our risk of cancer, and all of these factors are modifiable — there are things people can do to reduce their risk."

Dr Kate Allen, source: American Institute for Cancer Research.

Ignoring the signs

In a way, I was lucky - it was a chance conversation that led me to discover the lump. A couple of weeks earlier I'd been at a friend's party, chatting to a girl who had been through breast cancer twice in two years. I admired her strength and positivity, sympathetic to the difficult journey she must have been through. As I lay in bed that night, I felt it. A lump on the underside of my right boob. To be honest, my hand knew exactly where to find the lump because I'd already felt it before... and dismissed it. 'There's no history of breast cancer in my family,' I reassured myself. 'I had a clear mammogram just last year and besides, I don't have time to deal with breast cancer with my busy schedule. I'm sure it's nothing.'

Only a third of women immediately visit their doctor upon discovering early signs and symptoms - CoppaFeel, Breast Cancer Awareness Charity

I'd let myself fall into the majority that didn't take finding a lump on their breast seriously. It was time to reassess my priorities.

My GP saw me first thing on Monday morning and before I knew it, I was on my way to have a mammogram, ultrasound and biopsy. By midday, I was back at my desk talking to clients about their equity portfolios as if nothing had happened. But despite all the reassuring comments from friends and family, I suspected my life was about to take a nosedive.

I was told to wait seven days for the results which was too much for my type-A personality to handle. Patience was not my strong suit back then and I called the clinic three days later. My results were back. I asked the nurse to read them to me but she said I would need to come in. If that wasn't enough of an alarm bell, she suggested that I come first thing at 9am the next morning advising that I should probably bring someone with me. I felt sick with fear.

Dense breasts

I also felt angry. I'd had a clear mammogram 12 months earlier, which I had proactively elected to do and pay for myself. It didn't make sense. But when I looked back at the notes from that X-ray I saw the words 'dense breasts'. I also had breast implants which I've since found out can sometimes make it more difficult to detect breast cancer on a mammogram. Why had no one told me the implication of either of things at the time? It turned out I had a type of cancer that begins in the milk-producing glands of the breast known as lobular cancer. This is not only less common (it accounts for just 15% of breast cancers) but it's also harder to detect on a mammogram. I felt cheated. I thought I was getting ahead of the curve having a mammogram at 43 and breast density was not something I had ever even heard of, let alone known to take into account.

One in five breast cancers (20%) are now diagnosed in women aged under

50 - Cancer Research UK.

Learning to adapt

My world had changed very quickly. There was now only one priority and that was staying alive. I wanted the cancer out that day. I wanted to know my prognosis immediately. I wanted a timeline of events and answers to all my questions. But of course, no one had any of that for me.

I was about to find out that the next nine months would require an exceptional amount of patience at exactly the time when I felt like I had no time to waste. I would need a biopsy of my lymph nodes to see if the cancer had spread, a PET/CT scan to check for any metastases and I would need to wait for an analysis of the tumour they removed to find out whether or not I would need chemo. I had the courage to go through it, but the patience? That was something I had to learn.

The MRI revealed a 5cm tumour and my wonderful surgeon, Professor Mokbel gently informed me that a mastectomy would be necessary. I stayed strong, joking that I was in the market for a new set of boobs anyway, and I elected to have a double mastectomy to minimise my risk of breast cancer in my other breast in the future. When I woke up from surgery he told me that he had also found cancer in my nipple which meant a visit to the wonderful medical tattoo expert, Karen Betts for a 3D nipple tattoo. To be honest, it was all feeling quite manageable until he recommended six months of chemotherapy. Is it terrible that my first question was whether I would lose my hair? It might seem insane how much this matters, but it does. I have since heard so many stories of women pushing back on the need for chemo because they couldn't face being bald. I was no exception.

Up until now, there had been no outward signs that I had cancer and I liked it that way. I didn't want an outpouring of sympathy over my bald head and I couldn't face the idea of wearing a wig and risking the whispers if it wasn't on straight. I paid extra to rent a cold cap machine for the chemo sessions in an effort to keep my hair, but it didn't work. I bought the best wig I could afford.

It soon became second nature to hang my wig up on a hook next to my coat in the hall. It seemed like a good place to keep it, handy to grab when I went out to face the world. That is until one day when my son opened the door to an unexpected visit from his new friend's mum. We'd never met before and she was asking if I was home. I wanted to get to my wig without her seeing me, but she was standing right next to it in the hallway!

I braced myself, stood tall and prepared to explain my bald head to a stranger for the first time. I don't know why I had been dreading it so much - it wasn't nearly as devastating as I had imagined.

Coming from a place of YES

After I finished chemo, my boys asked if we could go on holiday to see the Northern Lights in Sweden. I'm not a fan of cold weather but cancer had gifted me a whole new attitude of 'coming from a place of yes', so I agreed. That attitude not only saw me driving full pelt up a mountain on a snowmobile (beanie on and wig flowing behind me) but in the months that followed it also had me challenging my fear of heights by zip-lining in Costa Rica and galloping through the South African bush on a horse I had no business being on. Of course, I fell off the horse, leaving me with a large scar on my left arm, but I was still really glad I did it. What's one more scar? It sounds like a cliché but I was grateful to be alive and have a chance to take radical responsibility for my health.

Something else I said yes to was a friend putting me on a dating app, even agreeing to her posting a picture of me in a swimsuit. I forgot about it for a while but when I eventually opened the app nine months later, there he was. This tall blonde Swede had been trying to speak to me for months and he now tells me he'd almost given up hope. He asked to meet and - although he wasn't my usual type - I responded with yet another spontaneous yes, and today, three years on we are about to set our wedding date.

MOVING FORWARD

My prognosis is good, but I'm also a realist. It's no secret that lifestyle diseases are on the rise globally, at staggering rates. That's why I've got my health habits dialled-in and I've built my life around those habits. And it's a life that I love and look forward to living every day. I've become an expert on what my body needs and I prioritise my relationship with myself. As I tell my clients, that attitude isn't selfish - it's self respect. By taking care of yourself you are sending out signals that you deserve to be taken care of.

The key to healthy living

It took hitting rock bottom for me to understand that your health is your greatest asset. It's all very well chasing your dreams, but without a strong healthy body, will you really be able to enjoy them?

My experience didn't completely change who I am - my type-A personality means I'll always be the girl with a solution and a 'step-by-step' plan.

I've spent the last five years looking at health from a holistic perspective, trawling through countless books, podcasts and TED talks and talking to numerous wellness and behaviour change experts.

Better health begins by examining our habits. What we eat, the quality of our sleep, how often we move, the way we respond to stress, how we talk to ourselves, all matters.

We are just one google search away from having information on how to live better. So what is it that keeps us stuck from doing the things we know we should be doing?

No matter how much you know or how good your intentions, you won't get the results you are looking for if you don't change your habits.

Dealing with health issues such as weight gain, anxiety and fatigue can feel lonely and frustrating. My 1-1 health coaching program moves my clients from overwhelm to a healthy life they love in just 12 weeks. Together we disrupt the patterns that are holding them back and create a new toolkit of good habits that stick.

No one gets through life unscathed, but building simple healthy habits today can have a powerful impact on the trajectory of your tomorrow.

To find out more about health coaching with Sandie Fredriksson visit sandiefredriksson.com

