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Jane O. Smith, Still Sassy after cancer

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· Jane O. Smith

Body Image Matters [1]

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As an image and wellness coach and trainer, Jane helps clients feel more authentic, compelling, and confident. She also produces experiences that inspire, such as the 2013 TEDx Bethesda Women's event, the Universities at Shady Grove forum "Beauty and the Breast After Cancer," and the new iTunes podcast "Still Sassy After Cancer? 7 Tips to Delight in You?" to honor National Cancer Survivors Day. Her content often reflects her journey with breast cancer, which was diagnosed and treated in 2008.

It begins with slicing and ends with scars and drains and much, much more. What our bodies (and minds and emotions) have undergone is nothing less than miraculous. Although healing is the natural response to cancer (thank goodness), we chunk it out based on what we're able to cope with and where we want it to take us. Each night we go to sleep with what remains, and it's not always a pretty sight—even for the most enlightened survivors among us.

Body image. It affects 75% of us. Breast and head and neck cancer patients especially wrestle with it, due to the disfigurement we experience after treatment. (Those with implants often struggle with body image too.)

The function of what we lost is missed, and it can dramatically impact our relationship with ourselves and with those we love and care for. The form of what we lost is grieved too. Those of us with changed chests due to breast cancer are often haunted by the literal and subliminal abilities and messages of what isn't there any longer.

None of my health care providers talked about body image issues as a normal part of the survivorship process, before or after my mastectomy. It took me years to understand and to label my dilemma as such.

After months, seasons, and years of reflecting, researching, and experimenting, here are my tips for moving through the Humpty Dumpty phase of body confusion after cancer:

- Focus on parts of your physicality that you like. Notice them in the mirror, first and foremost.
- Imagine that you are outside of you, looking at you. Decide to appear approachable, warm, and open. Do what it takes to look that way, on your face and with your body.
- Smile even when no one is looking. It is the universal language and will connect you to others (and to yourself) without exchanging a peep.
- Use good posture?don't slump and swagger. You look healthier that way?and more engaging too.
- Create focal points to draw attention to your assets, such as nail polish, earrings, neckties, belts, scarves, and shoes. Decide what your signature piece/statement is going to be, and wear it with reckless abandon!
- Wear colors that are similar to your own hair, skin, and eye colors, in interesting patterns and textures. Use an accent color that gives you energy?make the new you pop!
- Be authentic. Your essence, intentions, and appearance should feel true and real for you. One way to do this is to incorporate the concepts of Fashion Feng Shui (created by Evana Maggiore) into your wardrobe.
- Liven up your hair and head with wigs, hats, curls, and color. Try new looks that fuel your spirit.
- Move your body. Flow with the motions. Tap into your strength, even if you need to redefine it a bit.
- Refer to your body using positive language?internally and externally?privately and with those you love. The words you choose with yourself, your partner, children, parents, and friends will help them reframe how they look at and think about your physical changes. Your comments will pave the way for deeper and more courageous conversations that will help each of you change and grow. Your affirmations about your body will be a source of comfort to them as they wrestle with their own fears and concerns about the possibility of cancer in their own lives.
- When you are feeling the loss of what used to be real and true for your looks and your body, don't hide it?admit it. And then switch the paradigm and find a little humor or praise for what is looking and working beautifully on your person.
- Read articles by Michelle Cororve Fingeret, PhD, Director of MD Anderson Cancer Center's Body Image Therapy Program. Also check out *The Body Image Workbook* by Thomas Cash, PhD.
- Listen to the *Frankly Speaking* radio show about body image and cancer that aired on April 8, 2014 (with me and Dr. Fingeret). You can find it at CancerSupportCommunity.org [2].

Your body always wants to play. It knows you very well. That little child, full of curiosity and life, still lives inside of you.

You are bounce-able. Cherish the vessel that carries you onward and upward in this world. It is yours for the taking?still!

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