



Sharsheret

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For young Jewish women with breast cancer, common cultural traditions and a sisterhood of support create a welcome home after diagnosis.

by Diana Price

Each woman begins her journey with breast cancer with different support needs. Unique personal and cultural identities will determine what she is comfortable asking for and with whom she wants to surround herself as she faces the challenges along the way. The variety of support services available to women facing a diagnosis are a true testament to the increasingly powerful way that women are asking for what they need. One of the groups answering the call for support tailored with respect for individual traditions and backgrounds is Sharsheret.

Founded by Rochelle Shoretz when she was diagnosed with breast cancer at 28, the national nonprofit organization is dedicated to addressing the unique concerns of young (premenopausal) Jewish women facing breast cancer. Because she found comfort in the support she received from women who not only could share her medical diagnosis but also appreciate her life experiences and cultural background, Rochelle recognized the need for an organized network of women within the Jewish community. Sharsheret's Link Program—the cornerstone that still drives the organization—was developed from this idea, pairing women who are newly diagnosed or at high risk of diagnosis with volunteers who can share similar diagnoses or experiences.

The support that Sharsheret offers can now be felt by women across the country. When Candace Romani was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma, the New Castle, Oklahoma, resident did not have a wide circle of support to draw on in her community. It was the Sharsheret Link Program that offered her the emotional support and the practical guidance she needed to move forward with her treatment. "Because breast cancer does not run in my family and the Oklahoma City Jewish community is very, very small," Candace says, "I turned to the Internet for support. It was so comforting to find a Jewish woman who was very involved in physical fitness and who chose similar treatment methods. I also pored through the Sharsheret newsletters and breast cancer information that was sent to me."

It is this combination of information and support delivered from a community that recognizes traditions and cultural perspectives that characterizes Sharsheret's mission. "Sharsheret is a safe community where Jewish women and their families can turn for support and comfort during this challenging time," says Director of Operations Elana Silber. "[Our] programs and services are based on our fundamentals of confidentiality, convenience, and professionalism."

In addition to the original Link Program, Sharsheret now offers a variety of programs and services to support women throughout the Jewish community who find themselves approaching a cancer diagnosis from very different angles. Common concerns of women who contact the organization included the genetic risk of developing breast cancer in Jewish women of Ashkenazi (eastern European) descent, pregnancy after diagnosis, parenting, relationships and intimacy, the role of religion in daily life with cancer, and the impact of breast cancer on religious ritual and spirituality.

Sharsheret has answered the call of these various concerns by creating unique programs that cater to many different groups of survivors. Its Empower program, for example, addresses the support needs unique to single women, offering teleconferences and resource materials designed to address the concerns of women who may have questions about dating strategies or concerns about fertility or who might need support during treatment and beyond.

Women with advanced breast cancer benefit from Embrace, one of Sharsheret's Quality of Life Programs, created to address the needs of women who may have concerns about treatment options, pain management, and quality-of-life issues and who might also want support as they face feelings of emotional isolation or advice about discussing their condition with friends and family. The Empower and Embrace programs signify the way that Sharsheret acknowledges the diversity within the Jewish community and is expanding its services to provide even more custom levels of support for women with breast cancer.

Another goal of the organization is to make its resources available to Ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish women who may not always access breast health information as readily as a result of the extreme modesty and privacy that are part of their culture. Sharsheret has developed programming that is sensitive to these issues, dedicated to delivering lifesaving information in a manner that acknowledges the women's traditions while at the same time providing a critical support service.

Dedicated to acknowledging the diversity within the community it serves and also to the overriding vision of connection, Sharsheret plays a vital role in the lives of Jewish women affected by a breast cancer diagnosis.

For more information about Sharsheret, visit www.sharsheret.org or call (866) 474-2774.