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Breast Cancer Awareness Month - What Does it Mean for You?

By [Barbara A.C. Thompson](#)

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October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. We hear the words every year at this time, read the articles in women's magazine, see the television ads and attend the well-planned events. Curious about what other women thought, I posed the question, "What does Breast Cancer Awareness Month mean for you?" I expected the quick and easy words "for awareness," but instead received a wide array of thoughtful answers. I discovered that while the answer seemed obvious, it really wasn't. And here's the reason.

For starters, the word "awareness" has a different meaning depending on what side of the fence you are on. The perspectives include: newly diagnosed breast cancer patients; women who have had it and annually count off the years; women who are coping with metastatic disease; medical staff, funding organizations; community members; corporations wanting to make a difference and lastly, those who have never had it and don't want to think about breast cancer.

For those of us who live and breathe breast cancer every day, in one form or another, we sometimes question the hubbub around one month, when all year we work hard to promote breast health or live with it as part of our daily lives. After all, breast cancer isn't just a once a year agenda item, right? Thankfully, one breast cancer survivor made me "aware" that "Breast Cancer Awareness Month is a time to celebrate all we are doing to fight this disease." Other women who have had breast cancer felt the same way. Going to a breast cancer awareness function means feeling like a hero once a year and being honoured directly or indirectly for strength and tenacity. It means networking with other breast cancer survivors who come each year and sadly thinking of the ones who didn't make it. It also means feeling part of a large and dedicated room full of people and feeling comforted that they are not alone in this battle.

Women who have never had breast cancer also attend Breast Cancer Awareness Month events. Some go simply

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because their boss bought tickets and it means time off work. Others go because they have seen relatives, friends or co-workers go through breast cancer and they want to become "aware" of symptoms, choices and research news for their own health protection. No matter what prompted the woman to attend, each person goes away better prepared to take care of herself. As one woman put it, "Two years ago on CBCF Awareness Days, I listened to every guest speaker and I was blown away by the surgeons. They explained the process of mastectomy and also reconstructive surgery and how many different ways those could be achieved. [We] want that type of "advanced information." A statement from one woman says it all, Breast Cancer Awareness Month had a huge effect on my being diagnosed two years ago. I had never done self exams on a regular basis, and I think it was because of all the publicity surrounding October, seeing it in the papers and on the television that I did do an exam and found the lump. Because of my finding the lump early, I was lucky enough to have surgery and successful treatment and I am now in excellent health." These women see Breast Cancer Awareness Month as a showcase of education and the best--so far--of what medical science has to offer. It arms them with choices if they are diagnosed with breast cancer in the future.

On the other hand, one woman felt that Breast Cancer Awareness Month was an opportunity for the doctors to become "aware" of what is needed. When women are angry or frustrated they want to speak up. Open mike sessions allow women the opportunity to voice frustrations. While some comments are based on personal experiences, others speak for the benefit of all breast cancer patients. Breast Cancer Awareness Month can provide the platform for needed advocacy. One woman specifically felt it was an opportunity for the government to pay heed over issues that won't go away and that need to be addressed.

While educational sessions may open up communication for the patients, it also provides an opportunity for medical professionals to present, correct inaccuracies, showcase research findings, and educate. After years of attending breast cancer discussions, a number of women will tell you it's often the same topics presented, but most will admit they always learn something. Other healthcare professionals understand how important it is "to put the word out." Through the course of their work they see regularly that "women are often too busy and neglect their health." Having Breast Cancer Awareness Month "stops them and brings them awareness." Listening to experts on the subject of breast cancer provides the general public with accurate information that they can share with others or use to save their own lives.

Breast Cancer Awareness Month also allows breast cancer groups the opportunity to set up information tables, talk with people first hand and recruit new members. As one woman from a very active group stated, "It means being out there showing people what a dedicated group of breast cancer survivors can do!" For other groups it means being able to hand out material. They feel it is their way to help spread educational resources that could prove helpful. One woman commented that it was important for breast cancer survivors

“to let people know that you can have a breast taken off--you are still alive--you can go on. You are mighty!”

What about the funding organizations? We know how successful the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation-Atlantic Chapter's CIBC Run for the Cure is each year. Another event, independent of CBCF, is Titz 'n Glitz, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Both events are held annually during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Last year the CIBC Run for the Cure brought in over \$1.7 million for Atlantic Canada and the Titz 'n Glitz event brought in over \$130,000. What everyone wants to know is “what money from these events is then available to individuals and groups?” Titz 'n Glitz for example created Titz 'n Glitz on the Front Line, in Nova Scotia, which provides financial assistance to individuals living with breast cancer. CBCF provides funding for community health and research projects that benefit large numbers of people, including some that benefit the entire region of Atlantic Canada. Holding such large events enables the community and corporations to get involved. While corporations often promote breast health sessions in their companies, their biggest contribution is money.

Money may flow in during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, but some women see it all as “a money racket” each year. One woman commented that “women are getting tired of it. They want to know what the money is being used for because they find it hard to get the money.” Other women countered that by saying Breast Cancer Awareness Month is crucial for “raising money for needed research.” All agree that without money, little would get done. On the corporate side of things, business leaders see sponsoring Breast Cancer Awareness Month events as not only smart community involvement but smart employee education. Large companies employ a high percentage of women. It's no longer just about leaders signing hefty cheques; it's also about employees becoming partners in the race to up the ante for a cure.

All in all, it is the “awareness” in Breast Cancer Awareness Month that is essential in all its many shapes and forms. From the “subtle reminder for women to book mammograms” to collecting money to convert into improved services, treatment and research, Breast Cancer Awareness Month thankfully allows us 31 days of the year to “educate, inspire and give hope!” Let's put it to good use.

(All quoted comments have been generously given by women and men around Atlantic Canada. Their names have not been used. Thank you to all who participated.)

Have comments about this article? We'd love to hear from you. Please email us at abcn@abcn.ca!

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