

Menopause and Me – Sue Rogers

BY JILLIAN MATTHEW



Sue Rogers was diagnosed with stage 4 rectal cancer in March 2016 at age 49. She now has a permanent colostomy (Bertha) after a journey of radiotherapy, chemotherapy, sepsis and two lots of major surgery. Sue says the 'new normal' for her is a very different one, not only physically, but psychologically too.

"I have worked hard to get myself as good as I can. I work on my emotional wellbeing daily and I am fortunate to have an amazing husband Pete by my side."

Sue was shocked to find out she had rectal cancer as she hadn't experienced the usual symptoms, apart from one brief bout of abdominal pain and passing blood when she was on holiday in Turkey. She had put this down to eating too many nuts and goji berries bought at a market. Sue had gone to see her GP in early 2016 about a cough and when she mentioned feeling unwell on holiday, she was referred for a colonoscopy. Five weeks later when she had the procedure the doctor started to talk to her about cancer,

assuming she already knew. It turned out that Sue had a large tumour which had grown outside of the wall of the rectum and spanned from the front to the back of her abdomen. This is rare, usually a tumour would grow inside the rectum, and was why Sue didn't experience symptoms.

The menopause is now giving Sue a whole new challenge. Many of the symptoms are reminders of her cancer treatment. She finds her brain wanting to pull back into the trauma of past events and 'trick' her that she might be unwell. Therefore she says she has to be so mindful to continue to train her brain that this is not that journey, that it is the menopause which thousands of women are going through and that she is OK.

"Being a lady of a certain age the menopause has entered my life with a BOOM! My poor husband is like 'what is going on now?' And I say I know it is minus three outside but I need the window open. No you don't need the heating on its boiling in here. Why are you looking at me like that...? Many jokes and much laughter have been the butt of the menopause but then it happens to me and it is no joke!"

Sue didn't realise she was menopausal until she had a chance conversation with a work colleague who was having similar symptoms, which led her to discussing it with her GP. Initially she had put the exhaustion down to the stress of work. Sue has been suffering fatigue, fogginess, a change to her skin, itching, and at times she doesn't want to go anywhere. The underlying anxious thoughts and feelings Sue has also been experiencing, what she often calls 'rising panic', are very similar to how she felt going through cancer treatment: the brain fog, not

knowing what the next word is she wants to say; the night time game of 'quilt on quilt off' and spending a lot of time looking for lightweight and cool nightwear. All are similar to how she felt when having chemotherapy. It is also having an impact on her husband. He saw how she was through her cancer treatment, and it is triggering for both of them.

Sue has been experiencing symptoms that are affecting her stoma, including skin changes affecting how well her bags stick. She said the menopause is being talked about more and more and this can only be good, however the difference for those who have been through cancer can be that they are not able to access the medical support that others can. Sue's skin is so thin from radiotherapy that many creams are not suitable. Sue was advised by her GP that she couldn't have hormone replacement therapy (HRT) because of her cancer but she thinks they are taking a



blanket approach and not looking at her individual circumstances. She feels a 10-minute appointment is not long enough to look at the 'whole me' and work out what's best for her. She has tried to find more information about taking HRT for women with a history of bowel cancer but there has been little research carried out in this area. Sue has seen how much HRT helps other people and it upsets her that this has seemingly been ruled out for her, although she is going to seek further medical advice to see if she can be prescribed HRT.

Meanwhile Sue is doing what she can to navigate her way through menopause. She takes turmeric to try to alleviate joint pains and uses cognitive behaviour therapy to manage anxiety. Sue works for a UK-wide charity and has helped to set up a support network and menopause cafés for colleagues. She advises other people going through menopause that you are not on your own and to seek out a peer to discuss it with. She includes men in this too, as they are also affected by what their partners are experiencing.





Sue remembers feeling vulnerable during her cancer treatment and menopause has knocked her confidence and given her imposter syndrome. She said the trauma of having cancer changes your thinking, makes you think the worst and menopause retraumatises you and brings another layer of not being well again. She said you have to take a hold of yourself and think about the probability – that it's unlikely to be cancer again. For anyone in a similar situation, Sue said it's being able to say to yourself:

**“It’s not cancer,
it’s going to be ok,
you will come out
of the other side, go
and talk to someone,
menopause is
different”.**

Information about the menopause, menopausal symptoms and treatment options can be found at:

www.menopausematters.co.uk

