

Why I became a cancer coach: ‘The doctors were amazing but after I thought – how do I get back to being me?’

After being diagnosed with cancer in 2021, Karen Kruger found a sense of isolation was one of the hardest issues to deal with — now she supports others navigating the experience



Karen Kruger supports others who have been diagnosed with cancer. Photo: Mark Condren



Karen Kruger was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. Photo: Mark Condren

It was the middle of December 2021 when Karen Kruger found a lump in her left breast. Some weeks later, in January, she was asked to bring her husband with her to the appointment for the results of her mammogram and biopsy: “So we kind of figured things were not going according to plan at that point,” she says now.

Initially, Karen was told there was a 1cm lump in her breast. After a further MRI and several more weeks of waiting, she was told that, in fact, it was a 5cm lump and that a mastectomy and further treatment would be necessary. A biopsy showed that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. More scans followed, to check the cancer had not spread further.

“Thank God everything was fine there, it hadn’t metastasised,” she recalls. “I finally went for my operation on April 4. So it was a really long diagnosis process for me. I struggled with my mental health massively, which I’ve never done before. I was very low during that time just from having to wait so long for the answers.”

Waiting for her prognosis over those weeks was the hardest part of her entire breast cancer experience, Karen explains, adding that she felt isolated, and lacking the emotional support of someone who had previously gone through this experience.

“Sadly, it was a time when I wasn’t really aware of what resources were available to me. When they diagnosed me in the hospital, they gave me information about ‘What is breast cancer: Stage three, HER2 negative, oestrogen receptor-positive’. But it was only after my operation that I learned about the services of Arc Cancer Support Centre and Purple House Cancer Support Centre.

"The waiting period, for me, was the hardest part, because — other than my incredible family and friends — I didn't have any other emotional support. I was in the depths of despair, and I didn't have proper guidance. I didn't know how to cope."

She describes the pressure of having young children, — who are now aged 12, 10 and three — and holding everything together during that stage.

"I didn't tell them until just before my operation, so I was trying to hold face. I was completely lost."

After her mastectomy in April, Karen underwent four months of chemotherapy and then five weeks of radiation therapy. Her treatment took place in 2021, during the pandemic, which further compounded the isolation of the experience.

"My husband dropped me at the door for my first chemo, and gave me a kiss. It's very traumatic."

She notes that Breast Cancer Ireland's *More than a Lump* podcast was helpful. "Just listening to other people and their experiences, it makes such a difference," Karen notes, suggesting that at the time of your diagnosis, rather than simply receiving medical information, it would be helpful at that point to also receive information on the support services available — something Karen feels she did not.

It is this that inspired Karen, who is now 44, to begin offering cancer coaching. She has spent almost two decades working in leadership development, having studied for a degree in psychology from UCD and later a master's in psychology.

Karen has also studied psychotherapy and has always been "very interested in empowering people on an individual basis." She currently works as an executive leadership coach for Alliance, alongside running her own coaching practise for cancer patients.

"All you want is to have some sort of a community, somebody to talk to who has been through it before, who can give you guidance on it. Because my whole world just fell apart. It's terrifying. And I was so lonely. Even though I had people around me physically, I was so alone, so terrified."

In the aftermath of the treatment, she describes feeling lost and struggling to find herself in life after cancer. "I thought to myself, 'what does this mean? What can I do? What can my body do now?' I launched straight back into go, go, go, looking after the kids. I had my therapist, which provided an awful lot of emotional support, but it wasn't complete for me. I was still confused. How do I move forward? My life has forever changed."

She describes the pressure she put on herself to get back into a rhythm, including pushing herself to train for a half marathon, thinking, "I'm better now, just move on."

Instead, Karen found herself getting ill frequently, contracting a chest infection, needing her appendix removed. Eventually, she realised her recovery needed to involve paring things back, rather than trying to immediately return to her previous normal.

“But there was anxiety. You’re constantly thinking, ‘Am I making the right decisions? Is this what I should do?’ You want that information from somebody that you can’t find anywhere.”

Ark, and especially the Purple House, which is located closer to where Karen lives, provided wonderful support from acupuncturists, reflexologists, physiotherapists and nutritionists. But Karen felt the support of someone who had been through cancer would have been helpful.

“I was thinking to myself when I finished my treatment: I had my therapy sessions, which were brilliant, I had the physio, I had all these bits. But what I didn’t have was somebody who had been through it before and was guiding me in the direction to get the resources and the support on what next.”

“When you’re going through something like this, you need that community of people who have been through it. So the cancer coaching is really to work with cancer survivors at any stage of their diagnosis, with a particular focus on creating new practises that improve their own self compassion, that will help with their physical and mental health and guide them in the right direction.”

“Then I thought, actually I have a lot of those skills, insofar as I have the coaching skills and capabilities, the leadership development aspect and I have just been through this horrendous diagnosis. Maybe I can help people that have the same challenges that I had?”

Typically, Karen will work with a client for six meetings, on Zoom. The cost for six sessions is €400. “People start talking about all the things that they’re challenged with, and they sort of use it to offload and assess all of the challenges that they have. And we focus on the big wins that are really important. Personal life, if it’s diet, if it’s exercise, and talk about goals — where is it that you want to get to? What do you think you need to do to take it to the next level?”

She will also focus on strategies for preparing clients for scans or meetings with their doctors, working on anxiety, or conversations they might wish to have. Fear, a lack of confidence around the decisions they need to make and a sense of isolation are things that regularly come up.

“It’s trying to empower people to understand that you can take back control now. What are the things that you can control? Identifying those and working on them.”

For Karen, that sense of powerlessness that can come with a cancer diagnosis was “all consuming.” When people would tell her “You’re so brave,” she would think, “If you actually knew. Like, I’m terrified here. I’m only doing what I’ve been told to do and I don’t even know what I’m doing. So I’ll just listen to the experts.

“Until that point, I was very much of my own mind, very driven in my own way. And then for the power to be taken from you... I remember speaking to a friend of mine early on and saying to her how distraught I was about the whole situation.

“I woke up the next day and said, ‘You know what? Screw this. I’m going to take the power back here’. I gave up drinking and ate a more balanced diet. I thought, well, I can take control over that. For me, that was such a big win, to know that I was contributing now to my own fate as well.”

Behind all the wonderful awareness and fundraising initiatives, what Karen points out we often don't see is the fear — the terror — of someone who has had a cancer diagnosis.

“I felt like my head was in a negative thought prison or something. It was the first time I actually really understood depression. I'd studied it in college, but now I really understood what it meant to have dark thoughts. There wasn't any escaping it.

“And that is cancer. Cancer ravages your body and your mind. And the doctors are amazing. But what happens to your mind after it? Who helps you fix it? How do I bring myself back to being me again after everything that I've gone through?”

As she continues her own journey, it is exactly this that Karen hopes to help her clients with.

For more information or to work with Karen, see karenkrugercoaching.com.