

Career Interrupted

By Sandra Street, MA, LPC, MAC, AADC-S

You don't think it could happen to you? I didn't either. I love my job! I've been in this field for more than 30 years. Oh, at times I'm disgruntled with the paperwork and long hours, but, all in all, I look forward to working. Until I couldn't.

When I was asked to share this story, the request came in a kind tone of voice, "A career interruption could happen to any of us at any time." I make a distinction here — an interruption chosen by me and an interruption which I did not choose — or desire. I did not choose to interrupt my career. It wasn't planned. In fact, given a choice, I would not have raised my hand or said, "Let it be me."

My cancer diagnosis came as a complete surprise. I had few symptoms and they were subtle at that. In fact, the week before I was diagnosed, I line danced three times and walked in a 5K to benefit the American Heart Association. I had an appointment with my gynecologist the week following the race.

I was alone when the doctor told me the diagnosis. My husband was on his way to the hospital but they didn't wait until he arrived. I don't have the words to express the shock I felt learning the diagnosis. Of course I had thought about what it would be like to have a life threatening illness (especially when it happened to someone I knew) but imagined and real are two very different things. I asked the emergency room doctor if I were going to die from this and he replied, "We're all going to die from something."

I was hospitalized for my first diagnostic surgery to stage the cancer within one or two days. I was glad I didn't have long to wait but it meant I only had a few hours to notify patients in my private practice, the other professionals I work with on a regular basis, insurances, the contacts for my consulting contracts, and the Boards. In all honesty, I just went through the motions.

I hardly remember what the letter to my clients and my voice mail message said.

When I checked back, there was an

offer to help clients find another therapist on an interim or permanent basis, a number for a therapist on call for emergencies, instructions for the client considering self-harm, and even an option for the patient who thought he/she had to speak to me personally. I wrote something about being back in a few months but, truth was, I didn't know if I would be back then — or ever. I had the Board-required note in my files of who would have access to my files in case of my absence or death.

I had to put signs on my doors, text or email clients who couldn't be reached (after I had checked to be sure I had the proper consents), inform my medical billing company, and notify the landlord. I even considered if I wanted to give up part of my office space. After all, my income was going to be reduced drastically.

The reactions of my clients and my colleagues was heartwarming — like the one client who had just lost her father to cancer and, in her words, “couldn't bear” to think about me going through it. I had calls, cards, letters, and flowers, and my friends and colleagues on the state board made a poster that said “miracles happen” and signed it with get well wishes. Then they face-timed me for the awards banquet at the West Virginia Fall Conference because I was going to miss it — the first one I would miss in more than 20 years.

I had chemo for several months after the staging surgery. I spent full days at the hospital for chemo. Then I had a break from chemo, an extensive de-bulking surgery, another break from chemo while I recovered from the surgery, then another round of chemo. Chemo made me sick; I lost my hair, I got sores in my mouth and on my skin, as well as cellulitis in my arm from the needle sticks, developed an irregular heart beat (another side effect of chemo) and at the end of chemo, I fell and broke my wrist because chemo may have weakened my bones. I recount all this to make a point — the effect of all this on me seemed devastating. I couldn't see myself as a person let alone a therapist. I questioned how I would ever be able to focus on my clients. Was it even ethical to practice when I was so broken myself? If I hadn't worked through this, how could I even consider seeing clients? I didn't return to my practice for several months.

I returned on a very limited basis after 16 months of treatment but I only saw a few clients each week. I returned a different person. I thought I had always been empathetic to my clients. I thought it a strength that I could be with someone and not try to “fix” their problem. But I had gained a new perspective. I compared my powerlessness and unmanageability to that of a person with a substance use disorder. I could relate to their loss of control and anxiety, and their efforts at acceptance. I understood when they talked about the losses they experienced — their job in particular, and when they spoke of not knowing who they were and how they never thought it would happen to them. I empathized when they talked about how the things they built their life on fell apart. My job wasn't something I did — it was who I was. I felt the sting as they talked about how their family had been affected. I'd watched my family struggle with the seriousness of all this every week as they accompanied me back and forth to the hospital which was an hour drive each way. I became more conscious than I ever was of offering advice or platitudes, like when someone said to me, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” If that were true, I'd pray to be weak. I knew people may not want to hear about staying strong or talk about God at that time — or ever. I was very aware when someone felt dismissed or discounted and when they were offered false reassurance, as I had been by people who were trying to be helpful. The process not only taught me about taking care of myself and saying “no,” but about how hard it is to make changes or do the healthy thing — even when one

knows full well what that is. “Easy does it” and “A day at a time” took on new meaning, as did the Serenity Prayer.

I'm not the same person I was. I am aware that life can change on a dime. The experience still impacts me and my choices. I am still faced with people's questions and reminders — for example, about my limited hours of private practice based on the fact I still go frequently for checkups, labs, and screens. My stamina is not the same — neither is my patience (but it's getting better). Some people seeing my struggle encouraged me to retire but I didn't want to quit working and my focus was clear when I saw patients.

All the years I'd heard people say you couldn't work in addiction unless you too had a substance use disorder and now I thought the same thing. How could someone understand how I felt if they hadn't been there. But it's as my father said: “You never know what the other guy is going through. A good reminder to treat everyone with kindness — you don't know when it could happen to you.”



Sandra Street, MA, LPC, MAC, AADC-S, is a behavioral health consultant in private practice in Wheeling, WV. She has more than 30 years experience in addictions and mental health treatment as a certified psychiatric/mental health nurse, Licensed Professional Counselor-Approved Supervisor, Master Addiction Counselor, Substance Abuse Professional - U. S. Department of Transportation, Employee Assistance Program professional, certified gambling counselor, administrator, and presenter. She has been in private practice since 1992 and currently sees individuals and couples and manages several contracts with area businesses and healthcare agencies. She is a member of the West Virginia Association of Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Counselors, having served for 15 years as a Board member and the Ethics Chair. She currently serves on the National Certification Commission for Addiction Professionals.

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