

Submitted to “Dancer News” April 2021 issue

Ma*Shuqa Mira Murjan Orientale Belly Dance with Elegance of Style

**Here is my story of ovarian cancer recovery.
Cancer Discovery and Recovery: Ma*Shuqa’s
Journey and Advice for Returning to Dance**

Here is my story of ovarian cancer recovery

My journey through illness and recovery began in January 2006 when I found a large abdominal lump while lying on the floor in the boat position during a yoga class. Within weeks of a whirlwind of examinations and tests, my ovarian cancer was confirmed on Valentine’s Day and I was faced with the personal challenge to survive, thrive, and return to dance.

The emotional side effects of an injury or illness can be just as painful as the injury itself. It’s O.K. to be sad, but it’s best to realize that worrying and wallowing in self-pity is not a choice that will help you recover and return to dance. Here’s how to deal with injury and illness.

Your first reaction to injury or illness will be “why me?” followed by shock, denial, anger, and depression. An injured dancer who cannot dance will feel that they have lost part of their identity. Suffering from illness or injury that prevents you from performing can cause mood swings, feelings of vulnerability (will I ever dance again?), jealousy, isolation, and a lack of confidence. If you have ever been sidelined by injury or illness that prevented you from performing, then you know just how difficult it can be to watch from the wings while your dance friends follow their passion and continue to enjoy performing. After an initial period of sadness when you may experience depression, pain, anguish, distress, and torment from your illness or injury, it’s best to set a goal to survive and thrive, then take control and move on.

Take Control

You are on the road to recovery when you start to take control, examining your options, and planning your next steps and first actions. Being ill or injured means you will undergo medical procedures and treatment and will experience pain and disability during the recovery journey. Begin taking control

by preparing a list of questions for your medical team to find out as much as you can about your injury or illness and what to expect for rehab and a return to health. You’ll become a smarter and stronger dancer as you take in and internalize the advice and information you receive to create a personal recovery plan.

Research the illness and look for case histories in addition to medical information. Although we can research everything on the internet, I recommend finding a health library and having a health librarian help you research your injury or illness. Then, from your research – develop a list of questions regarding surgical options and later decisions about chemotherapy. Consider seeking advice from many different health professionals such as health educators in addition to your medical oncology team.

For a more comprehensive view, seek out alternative therapists: nutritionists, chiropractors, herbalists, acupuncturists, and dance/sports rehabilitation therapists for their different perspectives and expertise. They can give you additional information about prognosis, complementary treatment options, and rehabilitation. I found helpful information from surgical nurses, oncology nurses, and the chemotherapy nursing staff. Particularly helpful were pre-surgical preparation lists (bring your own sippy cup for hydration, pashmina scarves to keep you warm during your hospital stay), and post-surgical “what to expect” on hospital discharge – loose comfortable clothing and shoes to wear home.

Research has found that rehabilitation programs that incorporate both physical and psychological care can speed up recovery time. Acknowledging the emotional side of injury helps you control your reactions to side effects from your illness, handle constructive rehab, and deal with any setbacks that might occur during the healing process. Remember, most injuries aren’t obstacles that end your dancing. Professional dancers return from serious injuries and most even anticipate injuries occurring as a part of the dance career. Active participation in a recovery plan is the most key component of your healing journey.

Relaxation and Convalescence

Make a personal plan for relaxation therapy. View all of those “feel good” movies with uplifting stories (“White Nights”, “Lorenzo’s Oil”, “Forest Gump”, “Take the Lead”, “The Turning Point”). Take time each day to play relaxing music, such as beautiful Middle Eastern flute and violin music – and visualize yourself dancing. It helped during early rehab to avoid depression to visualize myself dancing while listening to the fantastic performance music I had found as I focused on the goal of returning to dance. Pamper yourself, as your rehab, medical therapy, and healing allow – take time for aromatherapy, massages, hot baths, and yoga – as your medical condition and healing allow. Here are some other ways to cope.

Dealing with Chemotherapy

“I won’t lie, said my cancer coach, there will be incredible pain as you process the chemicals and your body’s immune system kicks in.” Knowing this, and expecting the pain can be daunting – but I can recommend a partial solution for dealing with the pain and dip in body temperature. Body pain so intense you won’t be able to sleep – can be eased a bit by laying on a heated massage pad or massage chair. Pain is not alleviated, but a massage distracts you from the pain. Also know that you will see patterns in the timing, length, and intensity of the chemotherapy side effects by comparing your journal entries. This will give you a reality check and provide your support for your healing journey.

Make a personal plan for dealing with chemotherapy baldness. The American Cancer Society has “Look Good, Feel Good” sessions with cosmetologists who provide makeup and skincare information. And, at these sessions, you can try different looks and select a free wig. Hats, scarves, wigs, henna are all possibilities. Shopping for a long 40” wig to replace my hair – it was the opportunity to enjoy new looks with the longer hair length I had in my 20s. I had fun with short hairstyles with braids, and even a short wig similar to Halle Berry’s movie character “Storm”. Embrace your baldness and know that most women will never have this opportunity to experience the option to change hairstyle and color so dramatically and so often.

Enjoy your baldness – go ahead and have your head hennaed. I once saw a model in a magazine with a beautiful henna tattooed head – and wish I had known it was OK to have henna decoration on my bald head.

Set Goals

Setting and meeting goals increases your confidence, motivation, and self-esteem and puts you in control. Your goals may be anything from improving your flexibility—as long as stretching doesn’t interfere with rehab—to spending more time with your family. You can even choose to set learning goals for music and rhythm research that will enhance your return to dance. Be pragmatic and focus on what needs to be done, create a realistic timeline, and detail goals to measure recovery progress. *Use your recovery and rehab time to listen to your library of music and find that perfect performance piece and rehearse using visualization.* I found exciting new performance music that kept my spirits up as I visualized performing while studying the music.

I set healing and rehab goals based on my research and from long discussions with my cancer coach, Yosifah Rose, a performing dancer, dance instructor, Middle Eastern singer and musician, and breast cancer survivor. I set a goal to perform four weeks post-surgery at Rakkasah West 2006. The best advice from my cancer coach was “be sure you do the hardest workout of your life in the days before surgery – you’ll need to preserve your muscle strength. On the plus side you’ll be heavily sedated following surgery and won’t feel sore muscles”. This advice allowed me to “smile when I might not have smiled” immediately after surgery because as promised, due to the pain medication, I didn’t feel sore muscles. The pre-op workout had given me a head start on the healing process. The pre-surgery body conditioning allowed me to surprise my medical team when I got up unassisted to shower and change, and ready to leave the hospital earlier than expected.

To meet my goal to dance at Rakkasah West (dance festival) in 2006, my rehab consisted of regaining muscle control, balance, and stamina. In the first days home I walked in my neighborhood using a

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walker but found a walker encouraged poor posture and a slow recovery process. So, I headed to the health club to walk on a treadmill and within 2 days I was able to walk at a 3 mph pace and without support just two weeks post-op. However, walking on a treadmill is not dancing.

The physical goal of developing stamina to return to dance was met by enrolling in the pre-Rakkasah weeklong workshops. Only seven days before my scheduled performance I was only able to stand and dance for 10 minutes and afterward my legs shook uncontrollably from the strain. Developing stamina was essential and each day I engaged in more dance time gradually ramping up the class time. By Friday of that week, I took four hours of class. I met my goal and performed at Rakkasah West 2006 (see the March 2007 “A Gathering of the Stars” calendar photo). I truly danced with joy on the Rakkasah stage – glad to be alive and knowing it would be the last performance with my hair as chemotherapy was scheduled the following week.

At my first chemotherapy session the week following Rakkasah West, I showed my oncologist my Rakkasah performance on DVD. He was aghast as he watched me lift my leg in performance and said “You’re lifting your leg after abdominal surgery! I thought I told you it would be eight weeks before you could return to normal activity.” I would not have met my goals unless I listened to my positive mantra to persevere through the pain.

Practice Positive Self-Talk

One effective way to curb negativity is to consciously censor your negative thoughts. Anytime a negative thought enters your mind about “what you are missing or what you could do before the health crisis” tell yourself, “I can’t dance because of this illness, I’ll focus on being in control of getting well and return to dance more beautifully than ever.” When you give yourself this “positive goal-oriented pep-talk” you’ll take personal responsibility for recovery which will be ever so much more rewarding as you monitor your progress to your goal. Either record your thoughts in a daily journal; or establish your webpage at CaringBridge.org.

Values clarification as a behavior change process says that we should verbalize our goals. “What you say, you claim and value, you will do.” I’ve stayed positive by putting a positive slant on recovery and rehab while discussing ovarian cancer and sharing my experience and information about the difficult-to-detect symptoms of ovarian cancer. Early detection is the key to survival and the symptoms are easily missed. See www.ovarian.org for a list of symptoms. I recommend seeking a support group related to your illness. It helps to listen to the recovery journey of others and compare notes with your journey.

Neupogen and Neulasta drugs from Amgen provide a weekly blog sent via email which contains chemotherapy reactions, physical health, and well-being stories shared by other patients taking these medications during chemotherapy. It was very helpful to read these shared stories and personal experiences as they provided reassurance of *pushing through pain* and gives one hope as you read about the next steps and stages of treatment – and physical and mental effects of chemotherapy.

I encourage keeping a daily diary and recording how you feel, your medications, your vital statistics, and any side effects. Mark a calendar with your recovery and rehab goals. Your recovery diary helps you and your medical team. It helps to gauge progress and healing by reviewing what you recorded just the week prior and realizing that healing is happening, side effects are subsiding, and you are recovering. Be sure to share your progress with your support community and relatives.

Stay Involved and Seek Support

When people ask, I recommend sharing your illness journey and rehabilitation goals as a value clarification positive behavior reinforcement practice. Seek out others who have experienced your illness or injury and share their remedies and recommendations for diet, exercise, supplements, and rehabilitation. These shared conversations are well worth the effort be it in person, via telephone, or Internet because you gain a wonderful sense of sisterhood and a community of caring.

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It may be exhausting to respond to social media, telephone calls, and texts regarding your health status and healing progress. The “Caring Bridge.org” is a nonprofit site providing the option to develop a webpage, journal your progress, and keep relatives and friends in your social network informed. This organizer even offers a link to establish a “GoFundMe campaign”. The Caring Bridge also offers the opportunity to publish books from information gathered during their healing journey containing their journal logs and social media communication to help others on their healing journey.

Don't be afraid to ask for help, advice, and support from family, friends, and teachers. *Caring friends will find great articles on the Internet about dance and recovery to add information to your illness database and recovery regimen. I appreciate that The Babylonian Ensemble dance troupe of Seattle, WA gave me a handcrafted “Miss Moose Dancer” to keep me company during chemo. Enjoying life with friends even when bald through chemo kept my spirits up. Initially, Fatima Al Wahid pulled me up to dance with her at the Rakkasah East party. Then, Pat Olson of the band Pangia, who donates his hair to Kids with Cancer, “shared” his long hair with me at the Rakkasah East party draping it over my bald head (captured in a photo together) as we danced the night away.*

Keep in touch with your dance community both near and far. Read reviews of shows and catch up on your viewing of the best performances and instructional videos. When you are feeling up to it, plan to attend dance events to enjoy others' performances without the personal stress of feeling nervous about performing. Focus on sharing your appreciation of your dance community's performance art. You will find it can be rewarding attending performances, providing positive feedback, supporting performers, and promoting a caring community.

Value the Life-Changing Opportunity

While I wouldn't recommend that every dancer have a medical crisis just to experience a caring community, staying positive and in control through your injury and illness can be a life-changing

opportunity. Make plans during your convalescence to become aware of the positive impacts of your illness on your life. In addition to surviving cancer, my cholesterol and insulin levels returned to normal healthy levels as a result of dietary, exercise, and lifestyle changes made during the journey.

Your journey through a health crisis and challenge can result in the “It's a Wonderful Life” feeling. Now as I wake up each day and value every moment, I appreciate that I am a part of a very supportive and valuable community of family and friends. Make plans to celebrate your rehab and return to good health and dancing. Make plans to share what you learn during your journey to help others with their challenges and life journey. Many thanks to all of you in the dance community who have shared your experiences, stories, prayers, and very helpful advice – you have made all the difference in my life – which will hopefully have a ripple effect and touch the lives of others who face personal health challenges. **Hopefully, I can help make a difference if this article assists one woman to save her life with early diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer.**

3 years post-cancer: MaShuqa BDUC
2009 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEd6szgN2xU>

Ma*Shuqa shares her health journey from the perspective of her first occupation as a health educator with B.A. in Psychology, B.A. in Social Service, and M.P.H. masters in public health (and an MBA, and EdD ABD). Today, she has recovered from surgery and chemotherapy and enjoyed the world of wigs and fun new hairstyles, and looks forward to many more years of dance. **See her website for a list of recommended readings for ovarian cancer, dance photos taken during her health challenge and recovery process, and her current calendar of events.** www.MaShuqa.com Ma*Shuqa welcomes dancers with ovarian cancer to contact her with questions and share support for your healing journey. MaShuqaDancer@gmail.com

I resumed teaching belly dance 4 weeks post-surgery, danced throughout my chemotherapy, and

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am now a 16-year survivor and for 46 years has been and continues to teach belly dancing in her "Ma*Shuqa's Hidden Garden" dance studio in Los Gatos, California USA.

As a survivor of ovarian cancer, to encourage early diagnosis and treatment, Ma*Shuqa shares these important resources.

Signs and Symptoms of Ovarian Cancer

Risk Factors: Genetic predisposition to cancer, personal or family history of breast, ovarian, or colon cancers, Increasing age, Undesired infertility. Prolonged stress and PTSD have been associated with ovarian cancer.

Symptoms of Ovarian Cancer: Pelvic or abdominal pain or discomfort; Vague but persistent gastrointestinal upsets such as gas, nausea, and indigestion; Frequency and/or urgency of urination in absence of an infection; Unexplained weight gain or weight loss; Pelvic and/or abdominal swelling, bloating, and/or feeling of fullness; Ongoing unusual fatigue; Unexplained changes in bowel habits.

Facts: All women are at risk. Symptoms do exist and can be extremely vague, yet increase over time. Ovarian cancer tumors grow very quickly – do not delay in seeking diagnosis. Early detection increases the survival rate of early-stage disease. A Pap Smear DOES NOT detect ovarian cancer.

CA-125 blood test is not a highly reliable test and may give false negatives or false positives; however, it is the only test currently available. Diagnosis is made by CT-scan and MRI.

In the early stages, the symptoms of ovarian cancer are often not acute or intense, they are not always silent; they whisper, so listen and monitor your health.

Ovarian Cancer Resources

CancerCarePoint.org providing free counseling, resources, support services, and education to Silicon Valley, CA. Some services available online.

"Ovarian Cancer: Your Guide to Taking Control", a patient-centered guide written by an RN ovarian cancer patient.

"Resources: A Guide for Women Living with Ovarian Cancer", from Bristol-Myers Squibb, www.bmsoncology.com

National Ovarian Cancer Coalition (NOCC) 1-888-Ovarian, www.ovarian.org

"Ovarian Cancer: Quality of Life Issues", from NOCC

"Ovarian Cancer Resource Guide" from, NOCC
CancerDancer.org
CancerDancer (www.cancer-dancer.org)

CancerDancer celebrates the lives of those affected by ovarian cancer to educate, empower and stimulate research leading to a cure. We do this by spreading awareness and information about the disease and by connecting our community through the universality of movement.

Recommended Books:

"100 Questions and Answers About Ovarian Cancer"

"Challenge Cancer and WIN!"