

[TRACK 4: SURVIVOR STORIES: GETTING A SECOND OPINION]

Felicia, in her 30s

[Felicia]

I had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma a number of years ago. My initial diagnosis was a complete surprise. I never had any problems with my back before, but all of a sudden I had severe back pain. My doctor found a tumor in my spine. After emergency surgery, radiation therapy, and two years of chemotherapy, I finally went into remission of my disease. I was able to return to work, and my life pretty much became normal again. But, I was very surprised when I went for a routine three-month checkup after that and my cancer doctor said he wanted to begin an intensive round of chemotherapy the following Monday. I was confused ... all of my tests appeared normal. When I asked why I needed the chemotherapy and why so suddenly, my doctor said that he felt certain that I would come out of remission shortly and he wanted to get the "chemo" started.

[Felicia]

Well, I didn't want to offend my doctor. After all, he had taken good care of me, and I felt that I did not have the knowledge to challenge his decision. But, an inner voice was telling me to get a second opinion; I just didn't know how to ask for one.

[Felicia]

I had never had any type of serious illness before my cancer. To tell the truth, I was kind of frightened by the health-care system. But, I wanted to stick up for myself and get a second opinion. I called a cousin of mine who works in healthcare as a physical therapist, and described the situation to her. I asked if she would go with me to the doctor's office on Monday to help me talk about getting a second opinion. She said "yes," she would be glad to help me. When we arrived at the doctor's office, the chemo medicine was already prepared, which made it even harder for me to ask for a delay. But my cousin did not have to worry about offending my doctor. She simply explained why I wanted a second opinion. My cancer doctor appeared angry at first, but he did agree to send me to a nearby medical center for another evaluation.

[Felicia]

The team of doctors at the medical center felt that chemotherapy was not necessary at this time. So, I talked with my own cancer doctor again, and we agreed to wait on the chemotherapy until my tests showed that I was definitely coming out of remission. And as it turned out, I still haven't needed it yet. I sure am glad that I listened to that inner voice, and that my cousin agreed to help me ask for a second opinion.

[Narrator]

The point of this example is that there are different ways to be your own best advocate. Asking others for help when you need it is a strength, not a weakness. Can you think of other ways that Felicia might have handled the situation? Suppose she did not have a cousin in healthcare? What could she have done then? Well, she could have found friends to talk with about her concerns. Or she could have joined a support group to talk about different decisions that others in her situation made. Felicia could also have contacted national cancer organizations such as those that advocate for multiple myeloma for information about her specific disease.

[Narrator]

What would you have done? Remember that we all need different kinds of information and make very different decisions depending on our styles of learning and our personal situations. There are many ways to solve problems. For more information, you may want to refer to other programs in this Toolbox series, especially those entitled "Making Decisions" and "Solving Problems."

[Narrator]

One final area of self-advocacy is important for almost everyone who must deal with cancer, including family and friends. And that is the need for you to maintain a sense of hope. Maintaining hope in the face of cancer is not always easy, especially when the situation seems hopeless. But feeling hopeless leads to feeling helpless. What really matters is how we handle the situation, which can lead to feelings of hopefulness. Let's listen to how this applies to another situation, as described by Kathleen.