

You get by with a little help from your friends

Cancer is a lonely business. Here, Kate Bohdanowicz, 44, explains how her friends helped her get through diagnosis and treatment. All except for one.

She knew we were trying for a baby and she knew that the endless appointments at the fertility clinic were taking their toll on me physically and emotionally.

At 42, time wasn't on my side and when we heard it had failed, it also left me with a persistent urine infection (or so I thought), until months of antibiotics and visits to the GP culminated in a referral and diagnosis of bladder cancer. I'd turned 43 three weeks before and had already enquired about a final go at IVF. That was called off. Babies were out the question. Now I was fighting for my life.

I can't remember who, other than close friends and family, I contacted when I was first diagnosed. Instead, I blogged about it and posted it on my Twitter account. That way everyone would know in one fell swoop. The messages came in thick and fast. Friends shared my blog and sent their condolences.

Offers of support poured in from friends old and new – and friends of friends I'd never met.

Cancer isn't a shock – half of us will get it in our lifetimes – but at my age, it is less common and, of course, people were

concerned. I was overwhelmed with the responses. Literally everyone I knew (and many I didn't) got in touch. Everyone but her.

She wasn't a colleague or an associate. She was a friend, and a close one. We'd holidayed together, partied together and been there for each other when both our dads died within a couple of years. I even put her up for three months and helped her out financially when she was broke. That's what friends are for, right?

A few weeks after diagnosis, it went from bad to worse: the cancer was aggressive and my bladder had to come out. I'd never been so scared in my entire life. The operation was upon me before I had time to think and I stopped communicating directly with all but family and my partner, who updated my friends with group texts and Facebook posts. They understood I didn't want visitors in hospital.

And when I got home and faced the most difficult part – my recovery. I struggled to come to terms with what had happened and my hospital arranged counselling. All the time, flowers and chocolates were delivered daily to my door. I hadn't asked or expected them but my friends wanted to let me know they cared and seeing

vase after vase of bright colours did help lift me out of my darkness. That's when I realised my friends were great, they really were. All but her.

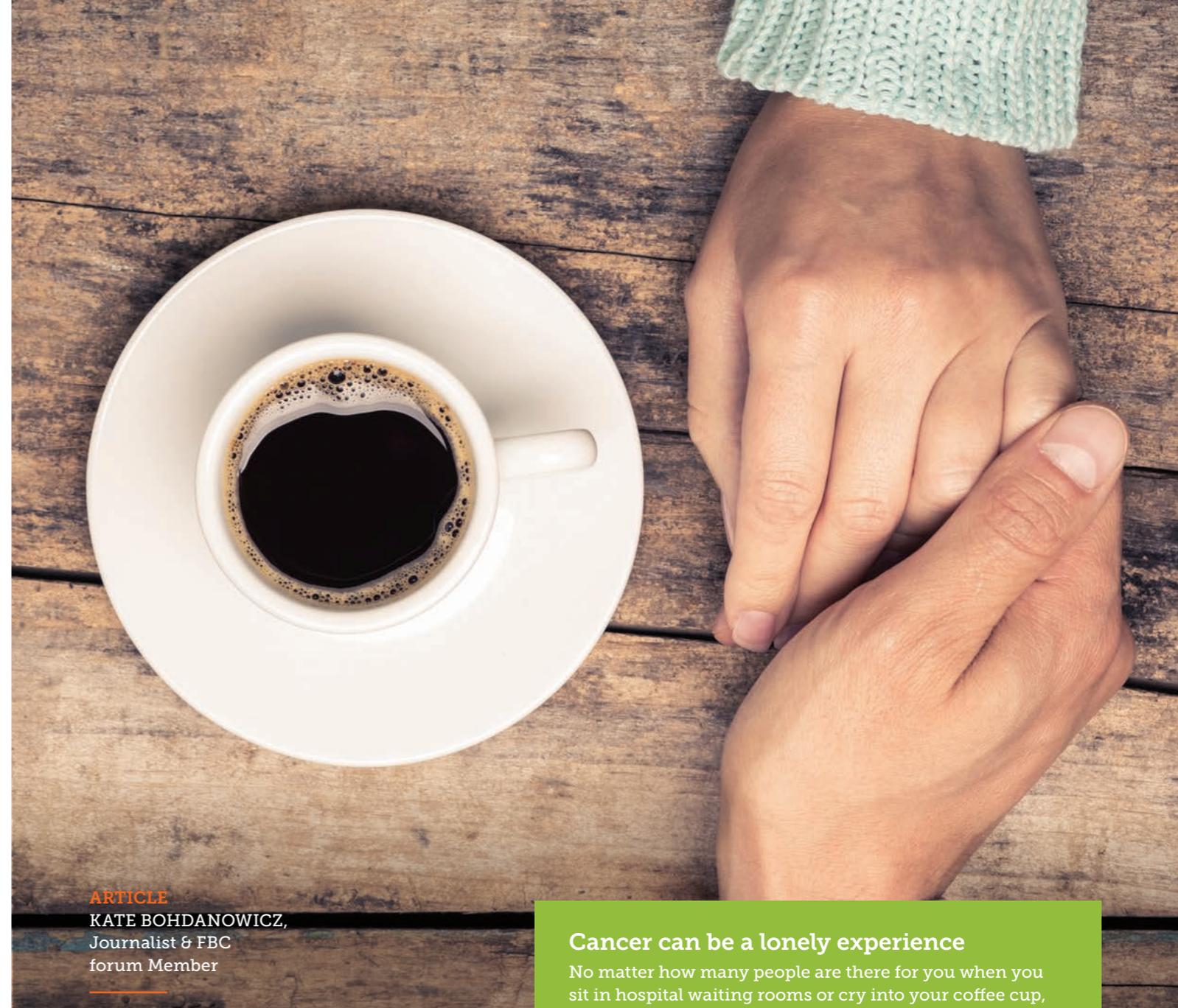
Restoring normality

Eventually I pinged back into normal life and started to see people for coffee, lunch or the cinema. Friends came over when I was too tired to go out and drove me to the station if I needed to go to hospital. Then the doctors said I was clear but just to be sure, they wanted me to have chemotherapy. What? This crap is endless! I agreed but I decided to make the best of it by taking a different family member or friend with me every time. We'd have a nice lunch before I was summoned to the comfy chair where we'd play cards or watch *Pointless* as I sucked on boiled sweets.

Just having people around me made it so much better.

Moving on

It's now 18 months since this tedious journey began. A problem with my neobladder meant I had to wait six months for corrective surgery but hopefully that's the end of it (aside from the regular scans and lifetime of worry). It's true that in times of need, you find out who your real friends are and, generally, people have been great.



ARTICLE
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Cancer can be a lonely experience

No matter how many people are there for you when you sit in hospital waiting rooms or cry into your coffee cup, it's you who wakes up at night, your head full of fear and what-ifs. It's you who slips on the gown to endure the scans, ops, treatments and endless needles, and sometimes you feel as though you've just had enough. You can take no more. That's when a friendly face, a reassuring pat on the arm (mind the cannula bruises) or a joke that makes you throw your head back and laugh really helps. Friendships have meant so much to me in the past year and a half. I feel incredibly lucky to have so many mates who have stood by me. A couple of my friends are now having their own troubles and I like to think I'm there for them.

Yet throughout this, it's the friend who dumped me that really rankles. I know we'll bump into each other at some point and I'll say I'm pleased to see her. Really pleased. Because I've got a few things I'd like to get off my chest.

I'm not expecting everyone to drop everything and pander to my needs just because I got cancer. A few distant friends disappeared, which is fine. We've all got a lot on. But this person was different. We were close. And when I heard from her friends, one of whom lives abroad, I know that she must know I was ill and yet she chose not to get in touch and that hurts.

I haven't heard from her at all. Actually, I tell a lie: I received an email from a donation site asking me to fund one of her latest adventures (did I tell you she travelled the world: a free spirit who never liked to be pinned down?). Suffice to say, I didn't reply.