

## SHAPE

### Cate Edwards Opens Up About Losing Her Mother

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October 14, 2013



*David Plakke*

Cate Edwards has certainly dealt with a lot in her young life, but one of the most tragic was the loss of her mother, Elizabeth Edwards, to advanced breast cancer in 2010. During breast cancer awareness month, the ever-strong and inspiring young woman has advice for making meaningful moments with your own parents.

**SHAPE:** What was your initial reaction to hearing about your mother's diagnosis?

**Cate Edwards (CE):** She was first diagnosed in 2004 with earlier stage breast cancer. When she was re-diagnosed in 2007, my reaction was shock and feeling a little bit overwhelmed. Understanding the diagnosis was a piece that was difficult. I learned that the diagnosis had metastasized to the bone, and she would be living with cancer for the rest of her life. It could have been weeks, or it could have been 20 years that we had with her. Grappling with that uncertainty was at times difficult and at times overwhelming.

**SHAPE:** Where did you go to find out more about the diagnosis?

**CE:** My mother first called my now-husband, then-boyfriend, Trevor, who is a doctor. He had done work in oncology, so he understood the basics of the disease, so I sort of had a built-in network. But that's not necessarily available to everyone. There is now a website called [Advanced Breast Cancer Community](#) [3] that gives a lot of guidance about the disease—the practical support, the emotional support, and snippets from people who are living with the disease and going through it.

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**SHAPE:** Who else did you turn to for support?

**CE:** A lot of people. This might sound strange, but my mom. We relied on each other in a lot of ways. The rest of my family—my dad, brother, and sister—were all part of the process. My aunt and uncle were a great support system for my mom too. And definitely friends. Friends were always there to help me out in different ways. I didn't recognize the importance at the outset of finding and using the support system for myself. I was so focused on my mom and trying to figure out how to support her that I didn't always recognize my own needs. I think that's something that a lot of caregivers and family members forget about: You're going through this too; you're part of this advanced breast cancer community and you have needs that are important.

**SHAPE:** How did you keep everything going?

**CE:** I lived in D.C. and Boston at the time that my mom was sick, and she was in Chapel Hill, NC, so I didn't see her on a day-to-day basis. There are things we can do even if we aren't there every day, though. I went to visit her as much as possible. Advanced breast cancer is different from early stage breast cancer. Early stage breast cancer, you can put your life on hold and concentrate on the patient getting better. With advanced breast cancer, these women know that they'll be living with this disease for the rest of their lives. The focus becomes more about surviving and making every single day count. I spent time with her in ways that we normally would, and that included going to outlet malls and laying in bed watching TV and making popcorn. We also did a bunch of trips together that were very memorable. Those were things that I think were really valuable for us. I would encourage other loved ones or caregivers, especially if they are far away and can't do the day-to-day things that the patient needs, to get valuable time with your loved one.

**SHAPE:** Did you have to make a mental shift to become your mother's caretaker, or did it just come naturally?

**CE:** It came really naturally. I certainly wasn't parenting anyone—my mom was still very much parenting me. At times I was able to provide her with some love and support, at times hysterical laughter—those are things that our relationship has always been about.

**SHAPE:** What advice do you have for young women with aging parents?

**CE:** Typically your parent is an extremely integral part of your life and who you are. Recognizing and valuing that is very important. I didn't know how long I had with my mom when she was diagnosed. The best thing I can say is make your days with your parents count. Spend time with them and value them.