

Sharsheret Book Club: Secrets Are No Fun

A Conversation with Author Rivkie Zeidman, DO

Additional Comments from Shera Dubitsky, MA, MEd, CPC

National Webinar Transcript

June 22, 2023

Presented by:



**SHARSHERET**

The Jewish Breast & Ovarian Cancer Community

This program was made possible with support from



## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

Melissa Rosen:

So excited to be here. Tonight we have something really very unique. In fact, truly, truly unique. But before we begin, I want to share just a few housekeeping items. First of all, I want to thank Daiichi Sankyo, GSK, and Merck. Their generosity allows us to continue to offer important programs and educational webinars such as tonight's program. Tonight's program is being recorded and will be posted on Sharsheret's website, along with the transcript. Of course, participants' names and faces will not be included. As questions arise during our presentation, please use the chat function to ask them and we will have our speakers address them during the Q&A session at the end of the webinar. As a reminder, Sharsheret has been providing telehealth services to the breast and ovarian cancer communities for over 20 years. Because cancer is so much more than a physical experience.

And as we move into tonight's webinar, I want to remind you that we are a national nonprofit cancer support and education organization and do not provide any medical advice or perform any medical procedures. The information provided by Sharsheret and tonight's speakers is not a substitute for medical advice. You should not use the information provided tonight to diagnose or treat a health problem. Of course, always seek the advice of your physician or qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition. We have a lot to explore tonight, so let's get started. This program is part of Sharsheret's National Book Club series, but it's the first time we've ever chosen a book written specifically for children or teens. It's something very special. We are fortunate to have with us tonight two speakers, Rivkie, also known as Rebecca Zeidman, the author of *Secrets Are No Fun*. And after Rivkie speaks, we'll be joined by Shera Dubitsky.

Let me first introduce Rivkie. She was born and raised in the suburbs of New York City and studied psychology at Barnard College. After completing four years of medical school in Chicago, Rivkie has returned home to New York City to complete an internal medicine residency at Lenox Hill Hospital. She hopes to combine her love of medicine and writing to educate and empower others to take control of their health. Rivkie, thank you so much for being here. Your book, *Secrets Are No Fun* tells the story of Arianna Goodman as she grapples with her mother's breast cancer diagnosis, navigates the halls of junior high and learns to rely on friends and family to stay positive during that difficult time. I have to say, I just reread the book and I love it. There really isn't anything else like this out there. Can you tell us how much of the book is autobiographical?

Rebecca Zeidman:

Hi. Well, thank you so much for that really nice introduction and thank you so much to everyone here from the Sharsheret team and everybody else who took the time out of the busy June calendar to be here with us to talk about my book and even more to talk about how to support loved ones and their families for breast cancer diagnosis. So to answer your question, the book is definitely based off of what happened in real life. My friends and family all texted me after they read it, who is who, but really there's so many combinations of the characters. Everything's exaggerated, everything's fictionalized. But the ultimate story and what actually happened is true. There are five stories that I based the book about originally when I wrote it, and from there I really just went on and just the book took on a mind of its own.

Melissa Rosen:

Very nice. Can you tell us first, why did you write this book and when did you write this book, and second, or I guess third, what would it have meant to you to have a book like *Secrets Are No Fun* when you were in fifth grade?

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

Rebecca Zeidman:

So I wrote this book as a reaction to my mom's diagnosis and everything that we went through as a family, and I really, really wanted to explain everything from diagnosis to treatment and everything in between in a way that a child can understand. When I was going through this, there was no TikTok, Instagram, there were no programs through Sharsheret yet for younger people, and there was no I-shine. So I really did struggle, and if I had this book as a child, well, I love to read so that that's a plus. But I definitely would've appreciated reading a story about another girl who was going through this and it would possibly offer some advice or tips about what to expect after surgery seeing your mom in bed unable to get up for the first time or after chemotherapy, seeing your mom without hair, all those things are definitely scary, especially for someone so young.

So I think that the book offers a little bit of what to expect for both children and even for adults to read and see a little bit more about how they can provide support for a loved one or a friend's kid or a family member's kid.

Melissa Rosen:

Yeah, I think that's great advice. It's great for young teens and for their parents for sure. I think we understand how your mother's life was impacted during her cancer experience, but can you tell us how your life was impacted and the lives of your siblings and your whole family were impacted? What did one person's diagnosis mean to your family?

Rebecca Zeidman:

For sure. So my family, we were a very close family and once my mom was diagnosed, everything changed, our whole world turned upside down. I speak a lot in the book about how friends and family were always in the house, and I think that's something important to bring up here. After the book was published, my mom's friends and my close family members were calling me to apologize for coming over and being by my mom's side all the time, asking me if it was wrong that they visited, what should they have done? And I'm here to tell you all that that's not the case. What my mom's friends and family members did was absolutely correct. My mom was extremely lucky to have such an incredible village of people, both friends and family surrounding her all the time. There were people sitting in her bed, not in her bed, sorry, don't do that, but sitting in her room just to talk to her and try to get her mind off of things.

People were taking her to chemo appointments. There were women who actually took me out of the house when my mom was crying. I never saw my mom cry when she was diagnosed and when she was going through everything, only later did she mention it to me and I was surprised, which is really naive of me. But I think it's so important that if you have a loved one, whether it's a family member or a friend to check in, whether it's through text, phone call, email, a visitation, I think it's so important. And even more so there were friends who took the time to sit with me and my siblings and talk to us, especially on Shabbat morning, Saturday morning, they played games with us. So if you are going to visit someone with kids, that's really nice and really great of you to take the time to spend and spend it with them.

From my perspective as a fifth grader, the reason why I was so upset by this, and I write about it being annoyed by the football team of friends coming into my mom's room is because this wasn't normal. I mean, it's not normal to have so many people in your house all the time to have people sitting in your mom's room during bath time, to have food dropped off at your door. And all of these were reminders that life wasn't normal. My mom wasn't able to do these things on her own. She wasn't able to get out of bed and cook us dinner and walk around with us and lie with us at night. So other people stepped up

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

and did it for her. But these were things that triggered me and made me realize that things weren't normal and I didn't know if they ever would return to (normal). So I was sad and I was upset and I wrote about it, but if any of you are here, I wanted to thank you for taking that time to be there for me and my family both then and now.

Melissa Rosen:

Oh, that's beautiful. So it's not a question I wrote down, but what you said makes me think, you speak during the book about taking on some responsibilities like waking your siblings. So did you understand at the time why you were doing it? Did you think, oh, it was to help normalize what was going on in our lives or to make my sibling's life easier? Why did you choose to do that and how did it help you?

Rebecca Zeidman:

That's a really good question. So my siblings, I think they're here, they still remember me waking them up, they hated it. I really felt that I wanted to help my mom and I wasn't able to cure her, that just wasn't going to happen. So I felt that by taking on responsibility, really small things such as waking my siblings up for school, I also did try to clean the floor every Friday on my hands and knees. I would mop, not mop, I would wipe the floor with rags. And I thought these little things would make my mom's experience a little more positive, would make her life a little easier. And now looking back, it definitely occupied me and gave me something to do other than cry and scream and be the annoying fifth grader that I was, unfortunately.

But I think that whether you are the parent, you're giving your child that responsibility or you're taking it out on your own, I do think it gives you a sense of control and something to do in the situation that you really can just take ownership of instead of just watching time go by and watching things in your life change.

Melissa Rosen:

That's amazing. Is there something that your parents did specifically that helped you and your siblings?

Rebecca Zeidman:

I actually think that there is, and I think it's something that's unique to my family, so I know that it may not work for every family. So from the book, I speak a lot about the boo-boo. I mean, the book is called *Secrets Are No Fun*, because that's the original secret. And my mom originally, it's a spoiler, I'm sorry if you haven't read it yet, but my mom originally called us to tell us that she had a boo-boo. And I was distraught, I was so upset. What is a boo-boo? Why do you need surgery for a boo-boo? Why aren't you telling me what your real boo-boo is? And looking back on it now, I realize my mom was having a really tough week. Speaking to her now she told me on Tuesday she went to the doctor, she had found a lump, on Wednesday she had a mammogram biopsy and they told her she had a 99% chance of having breast cancer.

And on Thursday the results confirmed her diagnosis of breast cancer and the entire time she was having to speak with friends and family talking about what was going on, she had to deal with us at home, carpools, extracurriculars, Shabbat plans, play dates, and we were demanding answers, what was going on, why were there people in the house closing doors whispering. And ultimately she told us about the boo-boo because she had no time to process. And realizing it now, my mom says she wouldn't have done it like that, but ultimately a couple of days later she did tell us that she had breast cancer and she opened up that conversation with us and she did discuss with us her surgery treatments, whether

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

she was getting a lumpectomy or a mastectomy, and the different types of chemo she was getting. I remember and I talk about it, if she was going to take a chemo that was shorter and that would make her hair fall out or a chemo treatment that would be a little bit longer and her hair would just be thinner.

So we spoke about this and I do think that having those open conversations was really special. And I think it's something that I attribute to my mom that she definitely took the lead of her children. She knew that that was something that I would definitely appreciate knowing what was going on and discussing these decisions with her. But someone like my brother, he wasn't necessarily ready to discuss that, to discuss everything right away, and it took him a little more time to open up.

Melissa Rosen:

So your parents were able to meet the needs of each individual child at the time. And it sounds like they also, beyond once she was processing and used the word boo-boo, she used correct words, she demystified it and took the stigma away from any of the words that might have been particularly scary or felt wrong to a younger child.

Rebecca Zeidman:

For sure. And that's an interesting point just because for me as a fifth grader when I write about telling my friends, I was afraid to use the word breast because I always thought that was a word to speak in the bathroom. So I don't even know. I always think, what would I say to a younger person now? You can say the breast is a medical term, it's a part of your body. It's not something to be afraid to say, but you could call it boob cancer, could call it chest cancer. There's so many different ways that you can offer language to your child that will make them feel more comfortable to say it out loud.

Melissa Rosen:

Yeah. Okay, great advice. So you talk about this one thing about the language and about being upfront with you once it was clear what was going on. In addition to that, what advice would you give to mothers going through a cancer experience today?

Rebecca Zeidman:

I love this question too because it really highlights my favorite part in the book. I talk a lot in the book also about my mom's hair and how it was when I first saw my mom when she had no hair, and it doesn't look like it now, but I have curly hair and so does my mom. And we had a very large camaraderie because of that. She bought me shampoo, she bought me gels, and she always brought a brush on vacation. So when she lost her hair, that was very, very difficult for me as a self-absorbed fifth grader, but I know it was definitely harder for her. And after she lost her hair, she wore a lot of wigs. She wore scarves on her head, ways to make herself feel comfortable, but I always knew that the wig and the scarf was very uncomfortable for her.

She always said how itchy it was, and when I was around her, I didn't want her to wear the scarf. So one moment in particular, I walked into her room and she was wearing the scarf on her head and I urged her to take it off. And initially she was hesitant because I'd never seen her without hair before, but ultimately she did take it off and you could see immediately how much better my mom felt. And in that moment, I was so happy that I was able to do something small for my mom, similar to when I woke my siblings up for the morning for the bus. And I think a good takeaway from here is that you really don't know how smart your kid is until you ask them. If you don't ask them if they want to see what you look

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

like, whether it's without your bandages on your breasts or without the scarf on your head or any other scars you may have, you'll never have that opportunity to show them.

And I think that having those open discussions, if you feel comfortable, I think that's really amazing and something that I encourage. And also at the same time, if you do make a mistake, that's okay. My mom told me to say that it's okay if you're short with your kid, just be there for them. Give them the love that you think that they need in that moment. And if you make a mistake, that's also okay.

Melissa Rosen:

Love that. I want to ask you, you wrote this book when you were a teenager. I mean, the first draft of it, really literally to help you process what had recently happened in your life. But I know from the publishing process that there were many iterations, there were many versions of it. And so I guess I want to know not only how the book evolved, but how your perspective on what happened in your family evolved as you became older, high school, college, medical school, full-blown adult.

Rebecca Zeidman:

Oh yeah. This book has been with me for a long time. Under my bed, I have piles of the different manuscripts and even when it came out, my family couldn't believe how different it was from when they initially read it when I was in high school or college. And I think that's really good that it's changed so much. And what's changed are the little things like the snacks. I always say I started with Dipsy Doodles and now I have Chips Ahoy. My son eat Chips Ahoy. So I think it's something that kids are eating now, but even more so I added my grandparents as characters very recently, the Bobby and the Zaydie characters that I speak to. I share my feelings about being afraid my mom's not going to make it. And just a lot of good conversations I think come from it.

And I really wanted to highlight to other children or to parents that really you can find support from anywhere that if it's not your immediate family, it could be your grandparents, your aunt, your cousin, your friends. You can have a "Hailey" and it could be a social worker, a therapist, anybody that you feel comfortable speaking to or you feel like it's a safe place for you to share your feelings, you should really nurture those relationships and take advantage of them at whatever age because I think it could really help you through. And looking back on it now, reading it through, I really think that I was very dramatic as a child and I probably shouldn't have cried that much, but I also recognize that as a 10-year-old, it's really, really hard to go through this.

And some of it is attributed to the fact that you're just 10 and you're self-absorbed and you're so scared and you just don't know what's going to happen. And even if people are constantly telling you that it's going to be okay, you really just don't know. And I'm very, very, very lucky that it was for me. And I do hope that this book can be a symbol of hope for others who are going through it.

Melissa Rosen:

Absolutely. And when you read the book, you'll see there are times the Arianna character is absolutely a spoiled 10-year-old, like all 10 year olds are, and sometimes so mature, almost another adult which is I think a very accurate portrayal of the situation.

Rebecca Zeidman:

Sure.

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

Melissa Rosen:

Okay. I am thinking that you've been with this book for so long that perhaps it might even be time for a sequel. Have you thought about what might come next for you in terms of your own risk? Your mother was very young when she was diagnosed, but not only in terms of that, but also in terms of educating others because I know that's so important to you.

Rebecca Zeidman:

Oh, for sure. And I mean, it's no surprise, my mom was diagnosed at 34, so that definitely puts me in a high risk category. And it's something that I've carried with me since I was so young. And because I was studying to be a doctor and with a medical background - screening and prevention is extremely important to me, it's something that can be very lonesome, it can be very scary when you're going through it on your own. So I think it's definitely great material to put into another book. And as I go through this journey, it's something that I really hope to write once more until then there is a blog post on Sharsheret about my first experience at the gynecologic oncologist when I was 18 years old, which is something that my mom and I decided it may not work for everybody, but that's just what we did.

And starting that screening and prevention journey can be scary, but at the same time, you aren't alone. Sharsheret can connect you with others who are high risk. And at the same time, since I published my book, I've spoken to so many women who are high risk, people who have had breast cancer and to talk more about their children and what to expect for them. And I think it's really opened up a lot of conversations that people have been afraid to have. And I hope to just continue this journey and see where it takes me.

Melissa Rosen:

Yeah, absolutely. And so necessary. And in terms of educating others, you just finished medical school. Do you plan on going into something that will help women with this or women's health or genetics, or what's your thought process there?

Rebecca Zeidman:

This is the golden question. I am not sure. My ultimate goal, I've always wanted to go into primary care with a focus on women's health and I hope that works for me. I actually had my intern mixer last night and I hope to get into the women's shelter. I know that women, our bodies are different, we need to know our familial health history, both mom and dad, and we need to be ready with questions so that we can get the right treatment plans that work for you and for your family and everything that's going on in your life. And that could be hard and scary, but it's definitely better to get ahead of it than to be behind.

Melissa Rosen:

Spoken like a true doctor. Thank you for that. Okay, Rivkie, we're going to pause for a second, but Rivkie's not going anywhere because we're going to have some more conversation later on. Before I even move on, I want to thank you for sharing so much of yourself tonight, but I want to post in the chat box that Secrets Are No Fun can be found on [Amazon](#) and through [Barnes & Noble](#), very easy to access if you are interested, if you haven't yet read the book and you are interested in reading it. So the links are there. We'll post them one more time toward the end. But I want to introduce now our next presenter, Shera Dubitsky. Shera's a name many of you might know as she has been with Sharsheret for many, many years and now she has a private practice as a therapeutic coach.

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

And she's actually earned three master's degrees in clinical, in counseling and in educational psychology. And she's completed the coursework and clinical training toward a doctoral degree in clinical psychology. She's a certified school psychologist and earned a professional life coach certification. While she was at Sharsheret like I said, she served as the director of support services with her primary focus in speaking with women living with advanced cancer. She currently sits on Sharsheret's Medical Advisory Board as a senior advisor and frequently lectures across the country on varying topics from navigating illness, the emotional impact, parenting, learning how to engage in healthy relationships and much more. Shera, thank you so much for joining us tonight. Your training, your past work with Sharsheret and your current roles really make you a wonderful person to be here to share with us advice on how to help children of all ages deal with a loved one's cancer diagnosis. So can you please provide us with some guidance?

Shera Dubitsky:

Yes, thank you, Melissa. For a moment there, I forgot that I was presenting. I really enjoyed that conversation. So thank you Melissa and Rivkie. That was just so wonderful and I'm thinking I can really take out many of my remarks because you already covered that. So that was very good. And I have to say that when I read the book that I think I may have actually injured my neck because I was nodding the whole time as I was reading. I was like, yes, yes. And I really probably could have gotten a job as a professional bobblehead after reading it. But tonight I wanted to maybe use that conversation as a launch to talking about I guess some maybe general ideas about conversations to have with kids and just general ideas. And I think that if you could pan out a little bit and think more generally, I think that will serve as a guide in terms of how to help children.

So the first place to start is that I think to better understand your child's emotional life, that you don't have to look any further than within yourself. All the tools are within yourself. And so probably the way you experience things, kids also similarly experience things. And I think that that is a great compass in terms of meeting the needs of children. So I'll give an example. When women call into Sharsheret, some have reported that they want to get all the information from their doctors, some people are on an as needed basis, and then there's everywhere in between. And I think that this is also true with children as well, as we heard from Rivkie. So if we think about when a person is first diagnosed, they may be thinking, "Is this really happening?" I have no idea what the doctor is talking about. It's a total foreign language.

I don't know what words you're using. How am I supposed to react? I'm panicking. And I once saw a meme that said, "If now is not the time to panic. How will I know when the time to panic is? Right?" What's going to happen to me? Will I be safe? Who do I call? Who should I tell? I'm worried about my family, will they be okay? What about work? How is my life going to look moving ahead? We all are overachievers when it comes to imagining worst case scenarios. So what are my next steps? So that's probably a similar list of what women are thinking when they're first getting a diagnosis. Now, let's think about the spouse or the partner or a sibling or the parent of a woman who was diagnosed or a friend, what are they thinking? I can't believe this is happening. This world of cancer and all the words that you're using, I don't understand it.

How am I supposed to react? How do I tell my kids? Do I tell my kids? Am I going to need to take time off from work? What's the next week going to look like, the next month, the next year? Of course, our loved ones are also thinking about worst case scenarios and what are the next steps? So now we've covered the woman, we've covered the family or the friend. So let's go back to the kids. So you have to keep in mind that as a parent or as a spouse or a sibling or a friend, you're probably days or weeks ahead of your kids. So you've had an opportunity to process it so that when you're speaking to your kids, they're



## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

probably going to have the same reactions that you had when you found out. So let's go through it again. I don't understand the words that you're using.

What does this mean? How am I supposed to react? I'm feeling anxious. What's going to happen to mom? What's going to happen to me? Does this change school or other activities? Am I safe? Is it okay to cry? What does this really mean? Who do I tell? Right? So similar reactions, similar experiences and similar fears. When the doctor is sharing information, hopefully he or she, is sharing the information based on how the patient is responding, the questions the patient is asking, not overwhelming the patient with too much information, and comforting the patient with reassurance. And ideally, the physician is tailoring this conversation based on each individual patient. And I think the same is true with kids.

Shera Dubitsky:

So my experience in the world of breast cancer started on June 26th, 1978, and I'm always going to remember that date. It was my parents' anniversary and we were all at my aunt's house to celebrate.

So after the meal, we all go about our ways and at some point we get called back to the table. So I was 13 at the time and my parents just stood up and announced that they had some difficult news to share. My mom said that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and that was all I heard. And apparently I missed the part about it spreading to other parts of her body because just the words breast cancer already had sent me into a fog. Now like what Rivkie was saying, but I think I'm a little older than Rivkie, but like what she was saying is that this is before people were talking openly about cancer. And I didn't exactly know what cancer was in those days because no one voiced the word cancer and there was no internet, there was no Oprah Winfrey.

And most unfortunately, there was no Sharsheret. And I remember looking around the table for clues on how I was supposed to respond, and I looked around and everybody was responding differently. My aunt was crying and my grandfather just was standing there silently and my parents continued talking and they assured us they were going to fight this thing with everything that they had. So all of us kids just sat and watched. And my 10-year-old brother, maybe because he lacked social knowledge or any inhibitions, he was the only one who spoke up. And he is like, "Well, what's that?" And to be honest, I don't even remember what my mom said, but I do remember that as she was speaking, her initial bravado softened and she became teary. And that was very hard to watch. My parents were very open about the cancer and about treatment and about feelings and you know what? Truthfully, I wonder sometimes if my parents were too open.

And I think like what Rivkie was saying, it's important to check in I think in the same way that I think physicians should be checking in with patients, right? And friends and families should be checking in, how much do you want unsolicited advice? How much do you want us asking? We should also be checking in with the kids. Again, our experiences very much parallel our kids' experiences. I think that my defenses were protecting me and I just only took in as much information as I could in that mode. I have to say that the dynamics, Rivkie referred to this, but the dynamics in my family were very different. So I think that we ended up collectively each taking a piece, and then we managed metastatic breast cancer. So my dad was a pulpit rabbi, conservative rabbi at the time. So his idea was, I'm just going to be public about this and to get as much support and resources that we could.

And for my father, there were no private moments. My mom, the rebbetzin is also a public figure wanted to be more private and she wanted to keep us in a bubble. My 16-year-old brother did not talk emotionally and did not share those things, and he just went about life as if nothing was going on. And I already said that my 10-year-old brother had no filter and he would just say everything we were all

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

thinking. And when he would ask a question and I was thinking, "Oh my God, I can't believe he just asked that," but you could be sure that I was listening very carefully for the answer, and I was the emotional one. And it was like a perfect storm. I was the only girl, I was the middle child, and my hormones were stirring up at the time. I just started middle school and now my mom, my role model was fighting for her life. So collectively it seems like we were all over the place, but we couldn't all do everything. My father couldn't be public and yet protect us in a bubble.

Someone had to carry the emotions. It couldn't have been my mom because she needed to focus on healing and that kind of stuff. So it seems like we were all over the place, but I have to say that 45 years later, I'm actually grateful to my family. I feel like we each took a piece and gave a gift to the family so that we can each collectively deal with cancer. You are the expert of your children, so you're going to get advice and guidance. You're going to Google how to help address the needs of kids, and your doctors are going to have suggestions and your friends are going to have suggestions, and you may have different ideas from extended family, but just keep in mind that you are the expert of your kid. So your role is to really integrate all this information, rely on your own knowledge and your expertise of each child.

Shera Dubitsky:

So we have callers into Sharsheret. Some people like my family, and it sounds like Rivkie's family really just shared information openly. But you know what? There are also women who've called into Sharsheret and just decided they didn't want to share the information and they managed to do that. And that we really have to respect each family's decision on how they want to go through this. So again, use your own emotional life as a template and as a map for how to understand your child's emotional life and then customize meeting their needs based on this. So for example, let's talk about conversations with your kids. Just remember that each conversation can be a capsule in itself. You don't have to put everything out there in every single conversation. So for each conversation that you're having with your kid, I think it's helpful to figure out, what is the goal that I have for this particular conversation?

Because there's always going to be additional opportunities to have conversation and to address questions. Try if you can to anticipate each child's need. Pace yourself and think about what's your messaging, what's the tone that you want to set? So again, if we go back to the original premise, what would you want to hear? How would you want to receive the information? You want to be reassured, that's really important for you, for your kids, encourage them to ask questions. Make sure that you actually understand what your child is asking before you answer it. There's a great story about this six year old boy who says to his father, "What's sex?" And so the father goes into a 10-minute discussion about intercourse and all this stuff and the kid pulls out a form and says, okay, but does that make me male or female? So it's really important to understand what the kid is asking and only answer that.

It doesn't mean it opens it up for you now to have to share all the information. Communicate clearly, and it's important to validate their fears and their thoughts and their feelings and that you can even say, listen, I'm a little bit ahead of you, or we're a little bit ahead of you. We've had a time to think this through, to process it. So when I first heard I was crying, I was scared, but you know what? I've calmed down and even since that time I've laughed and whatever. So I get it if that's where you're at. And each step along the way as Rivkie was talking about with her mom with the uncovering the hair. She has had an opportunity now to see that she didn't have hair. And so it was Rivkie's first time and to remember that you are just a little bit ahead in processing anything with your kids.

I think that when you're either communicating with your kids or you're making plans, try to anticipate what their questions are going to be. Because I think the better prepared you are, the better you're going to be able to handle the situation. Now, even though we talked about how there's a general

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

parallel between your experience, let's say as an adult and the child's experience, there still are some age appropriate things to keep in mind. And I don't want to spend a lot of time on this, but just to give a few examples. If you look at kids who are two to five year olds, preschoolers, they are very concrete. So I think one of the things that struck me about the book and Rivkie I'm so glad that you addressed that, is to watch your language. Because if we're using, let's say boo-boo, which is what your mom originally used, that the next time the kid has a boo-boo, we don't want them thinking, does this mean cancer?

That kind of thing. So I'm so glad Rivkie that your mom really had the presence of mind to revisit that for you guys, I think that that was just so important that she did that. So kudos to your mom. I think for latency age kids, six to 11, as Rivkie was saying, they're very self-absorbed, right? They're very self-reverential, so they may be thinking, I don't know, did I do anything to cause this? Did she do anything to cause this? Is there any way to undo this? Adolescents have more of a capacity for abstract thinking, and they're probably going to turn more to their friends, like Rivkie said with her friend Hailey, that they're going to turn more to their friends than they may to their parents. Older teens and young adults may have, again, as Rivkie said, and I definitely experienced this, questions about increased responsibilities in the house.

So on the one hand, I actually think that that's important for if the kids can help, even little kids, if they can make a bowl of cereal for mom, that's such a great lesson to learn in life. But to balance that off and make sure that no one kid is taking on too much responsibility. I also have to say that these older teens and young adults may have questions about genetics. What does this mean for them? I also remember being 16 years old and feeling very confused about my body. So as I was developing breasts, it was the very thing that was hurting my mother, and that felt very hard to figure out. And as Rivkie said, from that point on, every time I go to a doctor, they're asking me about my medical history, that can feel scary.

And when am I going to go for screenings? And how often am I going to go for screenings and genetic testing? When do I do that? And for a long time I felt like I was a patient in waiting, when is it going to be me? So even as a young adult, that was something that was a concern for me. I'm happy to say thank God I remain in waiting and hope I spend my lifetime in waiting. I think that it's important, again, to let them know that this isn't a one stop discussion, that as things unfold in terms of what's going on with mom, that it's okay to ask questions and to revisit conversations. And just keep in mind, what is the goal of that conversation. And when your kids are asking questions, it's okay sometimes to say, I don't know the answer to that.

You know what? I'm going to ask my doctor if you would like to know that. And this is just a caveat for all of you out there, and definitely something to say to your kids, we live in a time of information and it's very easy to go on the computer and start Googling things. So in today's day and age, breast cancer is unique to each woman based on her set of factors. So when you are going on the computer, keep in mind that a lot of the stuff you're reading may be irrelevant to you, and it's okay to bring it to your doctor and check it out. And the same thing's going to be true for your kids. Tell your kids that they may be looking for things and it may be irrelevant to them. So you should clarify that with the kids.

Shera Dubitsky:

I think it's important to let them know that you really are going to keep things as routine as possible. But you know what? This is also a time when you may need to learn how to be more flexible and to find the balance. So you're going to try to keep the routine at home, but there may be carpooling, there may be, I think Rivkie called it the football team of support. And you may have that in the household. And so the important life skill is to learn how to be flexible. And I think you can talk to your kids about who are their

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

go-to people and who would they feel comfortable talking to and how do you deal with stress and worry?

And is sports helpful? Is music helpful? Is gaming helpful? Is art helpful? The other thing, it's important to validate what they're experiencing and as Rivkie said, to also give a message of hope. And even though I was dealing in a family that was facing metastatic breast cancer, my parents always gave us the message of hope. The other thing that was really important was that it's okay to fight with your kids as you're going through this, right? Because you may feel guilty about having fights with the kids. And I know as a kid I felt really guilty when I was a typical adolescent and I felt guilty about misbehaving sometimes and I felt guilty about telling my mother off. And I'm so grateful to my mother that she had the wherewithal to understand that I may feel guilty about that. And she was like, no, there's not going to be any of that.

We are the same before where we laugh and we fight and we resolve and that's how we're going to continue to be. And that was so helpful for me not to feel guilty about things. The other thing to keep in mind is that not everything that your kids are reacting to and behaving has to do with cancer. Sometimes they're just being kids and sometimes they're being adolescents. So let's make sure not to assume that everything is because of cancer. I just want to end with this that I think that my parents saw this as an opportunity to give tools in life and how to deal with adversity. And I have to say, I think that my parents did a good job as I think Rivkie's parents did as well, because if she was able to write a book and really face it, it's very impressive.

And the fact that I was able to take a job where I was dealing with breast cancer every single day, I think was really a credit to my parents for really giving me the tools on how to deal with this. And I think that the cancer is happening no matter what, and it's a great opportunity to teach your kids' life lessons. And I think in all of this, it's also really important to make sure in your household and with these kids that there are cancer free zones, that it's not cancer 24/7. So make sure that you have in your house a place where it's cancer free zones. Maybe the dinner table is a cancer free zone. And by the way, when you're speaking to your extended family and to your friends, when your kids are out there, tell them that the kids shouldn't be portals for messaging.

Don't say, can you give your mom a message or How is your mom doing? Let them be kids. And the last thing is to continue to reach out to Sharsheret because you and your family don't have to go through this alone and you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Sharsheret has amazing resources that I think Melissa's going to talk about. And so Melissa, I'm going to hand it back to you.

Melissa Rosen:

Thank you so much. And can we get Rivkie back on the screen as well? We have some questions that have come in and although we don't have a lot of time, I want to try and get answers for a few of them. So I'm going to start with this. Yes, some parents are very open and some parents are not because either they're not able to themselves or because they think their kids can handle it. But I think the question, and I'd love to hear both your perspectives, is it ultimately harmful to keep the diagnosis a secret? Rivkie, let's start with you.

Rebecca Zeidman:

I 100% do not think it's harmful. As I said before, I think every single case is so unique and you are the expert of your family. And if you think that that's going to work for you and your family, then that's absolutely what you should do. And if you choose to tell your children at some point in the future, that's

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

totally okay. And I'm sure there are people within Sharsheret that you could speak to who have a shared experience and can offer support on how you should go about that.

Melissa Rosen:

Thank you. Shera thoughts on that?

Shera Dubitsky:

Yeah, yeah, just quickly, I agree with that completely. I do think that if we're now talking about kids who are adults at this point and they never knew that there was cancer in the family, I do think it's important to have conversations with their kids so that they can take responsibility for their screening and decisions about doing genetic testing. So in that instance, I think it's important for them to have that information so that they can make their own decisions.

Melissa Rosen:

Okay, great. Thank you for that. So what would you recommend doing for a child, both, let's say a younger child and an older child who just doesn't acknowledge the diagnosis? You've shared, it's obvious what's going on and they refuse to accept it.

Rebecca Zeidman:

Shera, I think based on your brother's experience, you're perfect to answer this one.

Shera Dubitsky:

Yeah, that was totally my brother. It's like, is this not happening in your world? It's happening in mine, it seems like it's going on. But my brother, he took it in. There's no question about it, he took it in. And I think that again, it's important going back to Rivkie's point, check in. So even with that kid who doesn't seem to be acknowledging, it is important to just continue to open the door and check in. You don't have to be asking questions, you don't have to talk about it, but if there's ever a time you change your mind or as I'm getting information, would you want to hear more about it? I don't think we have to be mind readers. I think that we can just ask the kids how they want to be, but I am sure they're taking in the information.

Melissa Rosen:

Okay, thank you.

Rebecca Zeidman:

I can add to that, sorry.

Melissa Rosen:

Yes.

Rebecca Zeidman:

Just to add to it, I do think with children it is good to maybe connect them with other children. I don't know how old your child may be, but there are so many young adults who are out there who've reached out to me through Instagram and we've been chatting recently just about their experience, whether it's

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

now or whether they went through it previously. And I know that you have a YAD program that you connect younger people together. And I think that's amazing because I think even if it's somebody that you don't know, but somebody that's your age and somebody who has a shared experience, that might be a really great way to offer support and get your child talking.

Melissa Rosen:

Yeah. I will talk a little bit more about YAD in a second. We have time for one more question. Rivkie, what was it like sharing your mother's diagnosis with your friends? Were they helpful? Was it embarrassing? Would you have done anything differently?

Rebecca Zeidman:

That is a great question. I'm going to speak very quickly, which I know I can. So my friends found out I'm pretty sure from their mothers. So everyone just knew. And I think it's important I do not blame my mom, I'm not mad at her because I do think for me it was good for people to know because that's how I get support when people know when they can help me. But I think every kid is different. And I do think it's important to speak to your child and say, I'm going to tell my friend, they have a kid your age. Do you want to tell them? Do you want me to tell the mom to tell them? How do you want to go about this? I myself, I was just nervous. I didn't want to be the girl with a sick mom. I didn't want to be treated differently. And I do think my friends did a very good job at that.

We played card games, we traded stickers, we talked about boys and vocabulary books. And I think that was amazing. And I do think it is also amazing to have a friend to talk to, whether he or she's your age, he or she's a cousin, whoever it is, but just one person even you could just make it your cancer zone to speak to.

Melissa Rosen:

Yeah, right. And now you say that, I remember in the book you came to school one day and everybody seems to know, right? Okay. But it was helpful. Shera, you went through the same process just a couple of years later?

Shera Dubitsky:

Yeah, it was great. I remember sitting in the hallways with my friends and I definitely played the cancer cards sometimes to get out of class and a couple of my friends totally came on that wagon with me and they were like, yeah, I need to speak to Shera. So we sat in the hallway and talked. I do remember my guidance counselor knowing, and I think it's important to let the schools and camps know what's going on, but I have to say, I remember my guidance counselor told me her mother's experience while I was going through it. And I'm like, okay, this is just totally overwhelming. So I think that it's important to check with your kids who they feel like they can turn to. And you may want to give those people a heads-up about the things that you would want them talking with your kids about or not. Certainly the adults. With kids with their friends who can't do that.

Melissa Rosen:

Thank you. I wish we had time for more. I really do. This is a great conversation, but we are nearing the hour and so once again, I want to thank both Rivkie and Shera for sharing both their expertise, their experience, and their passions on this topic. I hope you found tonight's program as insightful as I did. So as we conclude this evening's program, there is an evaluation link going into the chat box now right

## Sharsheret Book Club: Secret Are No Fun

there. And just if you could take a moment to share your thoughts, it impacts our future programs. And you can click that and still listen to the remainder of our webinar. If you have children helping you through a cancer experience and you are helping children through your cancer experience, or someone who loves cancer experience, I want to remind you that Sharsheret has several programs that can help to provide support.

Our [Busy Box](#) program is for families raising young children while dealing with a cancer diagnosis or prophylactic surgery. The children receive a box of age and interest appropriate toys and activities. Underneath those toys. In a sealed envelope is information on how to talk to children in developmentally appropriate ways about cancer. As with all programs, the Busy Box is free. You can learn more about it or order one through the link that was just in the chat box. And then as Rivkie mentioned, we have a new program I'm very excited to share about called [YAD](#), the Young ADult Caring Corner to support young adults through a parent's diagnosis. Here we're talking about 18 to 25 year olds, give or take. Sharsheret has actually trained peer supporters of this age who have been through a parent's diagnosis. And YAD participants have access to speak with our genetic counselor.

And there are a plethora of self-care and educational resources on our website on a page just for this age group. A link to the YAD page was just in the chat box as well. And of course, we will send both of those links out with a follow-up email sometime next week. And remember that Sharsheret's social workers are there for you to help you support your children, to answer questions, to connect you with resources, and to provide support. You can reach [our team](#) through the contact information right there in the chat box now. Once again, thank you Rivkie, thank you Shera. And thank you to all of us for joining us tonight. Have a wonderful evening.