

The Warrior Horse

Breast Cancer and Horses

By Vicki Jayne Yates. Published in Horsemanship Magazine



Before I was diagnosed with breast cancer I was a horsemanship practitioner. So my life was horses, my own horse and helping others with their horses. Some say I lived and breathed horses. Here I will try to share with you my cancer journey.

I found a lump only a few months after a clear mammogram. I was seen by the excellent breast care team within two weeks of referral by my GP. The tests to get a diagnosis included more mammograms, ultra sound and 4 biopsies. The tests came back as lobular breast cancer stage 2. I was terrified how had a large lump grown in a matter of a few months? Either I had very aggressive breast cancer or the mammogram couldn't find it. The consultant informed me that not all breast cancer can be found via mammogram and lobular is difficult to detect. After the consultant broke the news a breast care nurse took me to a private room to discuss the details, and to discuss the impact on my lifestyle. When I told her about my work and my passion for horses I was told by the breast care nurse zero contact with horses and that my work posed too many risks after surgery and during chemotherapy. Surgery was booked in and I had two weeks to put things in order. I had to find someone to care for our horse Kez and fold up my business. My friend Sarah took in Kez and my brilliant friend and accountant Christine sorted out the legal aspects of closing my business. I took my website down, and contacted all my clients with the news. I can honestly say I felt my life had fallen apart. I moved Kez to his new home 3 days prior to surgery and remember the last time I saw him before surgery I felt like someone had ripped out my heart.

Surgery discovered 2 tumours one behind the other not one found on the ultrasound. And the cancer had spread to 13 lymph nodes. So it was determined I would need chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Recovery from the surgery had its ups and downs and wasn't plain sailing. But once I was over the worst I decided to visit our horse Kez even though I had been advised not to go. Visiting Kez put a huge smile on my face, he was pleased to see me. I was careful not to get pulled, or bashed about so decided the interactions had to be a liberty, no equipment to get pulled with. Kez knew I was frail and was super careful and mindful. The visits really lifted me emotionally.



The next phase chemotherapy was the hardest. It was during my first chemotherapy session that I got talking to one of the chemotherapy nurses about our Kez, and she told me the advice of zero contact with horses wasn't correct. The advice she gave me was to be careful, especially when my immune system was at the lowest during each cycle. No exposure to muck, dust, dirt and to avoid getting injured. So no mucking out, poo picking, hay net filling, or grooming a very dirty horse. To wash my hands and take with me hand sanitiser. My oncologist also agreed I could visit my horse on the condition I must be careful and sensible.



Chemotherapy made me so ill, the side effects physically pancaked me and emotionally it drove me to the gates of hell. At my lowest I was suicidal. During chemotherapy my hair fell out and this was deeply distressing. We had a heat wave so wearing a wig was far too hot and itchy. I lost all my confidence and my world shrank. I felt trapped at home in a prison with cancer. Going out in the chemo uniform of a headscarf, people stare and even give you well-meaning yet hurtful pep talks on battling cancer. So I stopped going places. However at the farm was the one place I could go and people didn't stare or pass comments on how best to battle cancer. Our horse Kez never once minded what I put on my head or passed any judgement. My visits became my emotional safe place, as the farm is a peaceful and beautiful place. Kez treated me as me, not as

someone who had cancer. Yes he knew I was poorly, and he was mindful. He allowed me to just be, to relax, chill and be part of his world. It was the place I could go to connect into a world that had nothing to do with cancer. I could recharge, connect with nature and leave cancer at the farm gate.

I only managed 4 out of 6 chemotherapy. The physical side effects each round got worse and the 4th round gave a deep vein thrombosis. Emotionally I had nothing left either. It was getting too dangerous to continue. Radiation therapy followed. Apart from the burns, sore skin and exhaustion it wasn't too bad. The surgery, chemotherapy, the DVT and radiation took its toll and at my lowest I could barely walk. Bit by bit I got stronger. And my horse has helped. Bit by bit I could do more. And the first day I led him from the field to the yard I had a grin from one side of my face to the other. The simple things such as brushing his mane gave me so much pleasure and joy and still do. Physically I got strong enough to start doing some light stable duties. And the first day I managed to clean out his stable was a turning point. Yes I was wiped out after, but I did it. Gradually physically I got stronger and stronger and caring for a horse gives you a good work out. Emotionally I became more confident, finding I could do more spurred me on to try more. Spiritually I already had a deep and very meaningful connection with Kez. However my journey with cancer took it to another level. I was as weak as a kitten and he knew. Our love bond, partnership, connection, call it what you want, I say we can see into each other's souls. He's a warrior horse, a warrior who turns up by my side, ready to battle, ready to take on with me my cancer and silently weave his healing into to me to slay the demons cancer brings into life.

The therapeutic benefits horses can bring to us is well documented and practiced. Kez has certainly changed my life. My husband and I bought him as a riding horse to share, that dream was not to happen. Kez has conditions that mean riding is not for him. Kez is the reason we started the Non Ridden Equine Facebook group and thousands have joined us. The non ridden agenda has gone global, with local, regional and national affiliated groups joining to create a network. And it was clear more has to be done for non ridden equines and people who choose not to ride so the not for profit Non Ridden Equine Association UK was launched. We are not anti-riding, as everything non ridden is of huge benefit to riders and equines that are ridden. Non ridden should not mean a wasted horse, or a worthless horse. The gifts these horses can bring to people are profound and life changing.

www.thenonriddenequineassociationuk.org

