

# Breast cancer surgeon runs a farm where the only crop is wellness

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Monique Gary, a breast cancer surgeon, is a self-described "Philly girl" who was born in Jefferson Einstein hospital and graduated from Philadelphia High School for Girls.

Four years ago, she left city life and bought a 40-acre farm in Upper Bucks County, where she runs free, daylong retreats for cancer patients and offers nature walks, aromatherapy, juicing and cooking demonstrations, gardening, and yoga by her fish pond.

The farm's only crop is wellness. "I'm a busy surgeon and when I moved here, I didn't have any crops, but I knew the one seed that I wanted to plant was wellness," said Gary, who serves as medical director of the cancer program at Grand View Health/Penn Cancer Network.

Gary, known as "Dr. Mo" to her patients, spoke to The Inquirer about how she incorporates what she calls "whole person health"—caring for her patients in mind, body, and spirit—into [cancer treatment](#). This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

## **What led you to become a breast cancer surgeon?**

My mother was a nurse. My grandmother was a nurse. I grew up watching them take care of others. I watched my mom get really sick when I was 7. She had [ovarian cancer](#) and died before age 30. It was a tough time.

My grandmother took care of us. She made it a priority to try to enrich our lives. And then she got diagnosed with [breast cancer](#) when I was about 12. I remember watching her be very afraid. She went into the hospital for about a week, and she came back without a breast. I grew up wanting to take care of sick people with cancer and wanting to help their disease.

## **Does your family's health history make you fearful about getting cancer?**

There's a part of me that worries about it, and it makes me exercise when I feel kinda sluggish. I try to practice what I preach, which is really hard, and that's why I'm very transparent with my patients. I'm a true accountability buddy. I'll say to them, "I'll commit to exercising or moving 30 minutes a day. Can you commit to that, too? Let's pinky swear on it." I treat my vulnerability as an opportunity to connect with people who are also afraid. I try to focus on the things that I can control. I try to focus on living my life with grace.

## **You practice 'whole person health.' What does that mean?**

I have a chance to help and remove that cancer and be a guide toward hopefully giving [women] longevity and a better outlook on life. I tell my patients it's an opportunity to get rid of all the cancers in your life—if it's that adult kid who lives in the basement, or that husband who is not faithful, or that job that's pretty toxic.

Let's look at all the cancers, and let's start to figure out how to untangle your life. I love the relationship that I have with patients as they go through that transformative process.

## **What advice do you give breast cancer survivors when it comes to intimacy with a partner?**

It's a process. It's not a one-and-done. That means that you are going to have to give yourself some grace for trial and error. And it also means that some of the work is internal, because we have internalized fear and shame. We don't own the fact that pleasure is our right. I say, "If cancer has taught you nothing else, it's that you deserve to put yourself first and that includes your pleasure."

We'll go through the whole gamut of all their health, and then the next question is, "Well how's your intimacy?" And then waterworks because there's so many blockages, whether it's "I'm ashamed of my body' or 'my scars don't feel good," or "I'm tired all the time" or "I don't think my husband is attracted to me." There's so many factors, and it means that it's going to be a journey, but that journey is worth it.

I tell my couples, "Listen, you can't expect fireworks the first time after surgery and chemo and radiation. You have to start with really small goals. We're just going to kiss and touch for five good minutes without feeling pain, shame, blame, or worry. Just be present in that space for five minutes."

## **You are big into 'food as medicine.' What are some cancer-fighting foods?**

The foods that fight cancer are foods that decrease inflammation. They thin your blood, so you are going to want to stop those before surgery—so talk to your doctor to make sure they're safe. But anti-cancer foods or anti-inflammatory foods are things like: turmeric, ginger, garlic, leeks. Foods that are high in antioxidants—blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, cherries, and citrus fruits.

Food as medicine can be ways to stop diarrhea or decrease nausea, like ginger and bananas. Foods that will settle your stomach are foods that are high in omega fatty acids like lean fish.

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