

Testing the Waters: A Tale of Cancer Disclosure, Math and Mermaids

After learning she has triple-negative breast cancer in 2022, Jackie Lantry ponders which friends to tell—and how to do it. She decides to start with the mermaids.

June 9, 2025 By Jackie Lantry

I'm awkwardly making my way through the "How do I tell people? Who do I tell? What do I say?" phase of a cancer diagnosis. I swim and attend a water aerobics class four days a week with the Pods Pool club in East Providence, Rhode Island, so of course the mermaids, as I dubbed the ladies in my class, are on the "tell" list.

It's all so weird—like a big reveal gone wrong. The very worst thing is getting all emotional. I am not a cry-in-public kind of gal. That said, I am very tenderhearted, so I've spent a lifetime trying to master how not to get overemotional in sensitive situations. When I was preparing to deliver the eulogy for my dear Aunt Charlotte, I researched strategies to get through it sans tears. One bit of advice was this: If you start to get emotional, stop, take a breath and do a quick math calculation in your head. It will literally shift your mind from the emotional to the practical (and dry up your tear ducts in the process). I tried it. It was very effective. There were tears, but I was not a blubbing, leaky mess.

As I drove to the pool, I thought about how I'd tell them. They were in the shallow end when I arrived: a line of mermaids, foam barbells in hand. I stood at the edge of the deep end and dipped my toe in to test the water. I dived in. I have a love-hate relationship with that first dive. I hate the bracing shock of cold, but I love the feeling of the water rushing along my body.

Swimming toward the group, I thought about what to say.

"I have cancer." Nope, not a good opening line.

"I have an announcement." Nah, sounds too official.

“There’s no easy way to say this.” Lck, sense of impending doom.

“I’m not sure how to do this, and there’s no instruction book, so I’ll just say it.” Yeah, that feels right. I’ll just stick to the facts.

I was filled with dread. The very last thing I wanted to do was cry in public. The horrible scrunched-up face. Not for me.

While we aqua punched, I practiced the opening line in my head.

“There’s no rule book.” Wait, no, that’s not it. “There’s no instruction book.”

We did jumping jacks. (I practiced my lines.) We cross-country skied and ran in place (more practice).

By the time we got to aqua yoga, I was settled. It would go like this: Deep breath. Stick to the facts. If things get emotional, rustle up a little trigonometry.

Sandy, the instructor, said, “Jackie has an announcement.”

Deep breath. Stick to the facts.

“There’s no instruction book for this, so I’m just going to say it.”

“I have...” Bit of panic. Math. Math!

8 times 8, 8 times freakin’ 8, what the hell? I felt tears well up. I felt my face scrunching up.

I choked out, “I have breast cancer.” I tried to follow up with, “I’m not going to be around for a while,” but I was flailing. I think I said, “Everything is going to be OK,” but my mind went blank.

Then I was lost.

I saw someone moving toward me, raising their hand.

“Survivor,” Mary said, in a strong, steady voice, as she put her hand in the air.

“Survivor,” Sandy said, raising her hand.

“Survivor,” another Mary said, raising her hand.

They moved in, hugging me in turn, surrounding me with...survival.

Jackie Lantry is retired and lives in Southern New England. After 14 months of treatment, she has no signs of breast cancer and is now on a five-year hormone therapy regimen.

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