

**About Health TV with Jeanne Blake**  
**Surviving Breast Cancer: The Courage Muscle**  
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*, I'm Jeanne Blake. When one hears the words breast cancer certain images come to mind. I think of friends that have lived with the disease of fear, chemo and hair loss. But from now when I hear the words I think that I'll also think of the word laughter because of this book: "*The Courage Muscle – A Chicken's Guide to Living with Breast Cancer.*" I don't think I'll ever forget reading Monique Doyle Spencer's account of her journey with breast cancer. Monique welcome.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE: Wow, you are funny and this is a great, great book.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I'm glad to be here. Thanks.

JEANNE BLAKE: I mean, who would ever think that people must be thinking you're crazy, right?

MONIQUE SPENCER: A lot of people do.

JEANNE BLAKE: The first part wasn't so funny. You didn't find that humor muscle right away.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Not at the beginning.

JEANNE BLAKE: Give us a little bit of background about your diagnosis and how you learned that you had breast cancer.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I woke up one morning with a very large lump that had never been there. I have a kind of cancer that isn't detected on a mammogram.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because you had been having mammograms?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, I had mammograms every year so I wasn't too bitter than I had gone every year for a mammogram and I had a cancer that didn't turn up on it and there's a lot of work being done to find those. I had a very large tumor, went to the doctor, got the diagnosis and I was mainly thinking well this can't be happening to me because everybody that I've ever heard of who has cancer is a hero. Lance Armstrong is a hero. I mean you turn on the Olympics it's riddled with cancer patients who are now winning the decathlon. I really thought I don't really belong in this club. There are a lot of heroes here and I'm not one of them so I began my diagnosis convinced that I was going to be the biggest chicken who have ever had cancer.

JEANNE BLAKE: You actually were angry too. You said, I like what you wrote that you and your husband, Michael, who you write a lot about. Didn't exactly just hold each other and sing folk songs. You were angry in the beginning.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Oh sure.

JEANNE BLAKE: Which of course is a very natural emotion.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Oh sure. You're looking at basically a year of your life that you're going to be devoting to cancer treatment. You're going to try to make cancer part of your life and not your life but pretty hard to do. Our kids were eight and 13 and nobody wants to get cancer. But of course, we started off a little mad. The good thing that we did was we had planned to leave for Spain the day after our diagnosis and we went anyway. The doctor had said come on in tomorrow and we'll get started and I said how about I see you next week. It was one of the best trips I've ever had.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think some people might be amazed at that. Were you able to put it out of your mind?

MONIQUE SPENCER: I really felt, well, I'm going to take this trip and I'm going to do it my way. So I said to the kids, leave your jeans home. You're going to be dressed at all times to go wherever I want to go. If I want to go into a Cathedral, you'll be appropriately dressed. No tank tops. If I want to go to a nightclub, you'll be appropriately dressed. The first night I took them at about 2:00 in the morning to a Flamingo Bar in Madrid down this dark alley. My husband was terrified, the kids were terrified. We had a fabulous time.

JEANNE BLAKE: Is that where you had that pitcher of Sangria and a cigar?

MONIQUE SPENCER: I actually had that at the wedding that we were going to.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay. Sorry to confuse all these fun times you were having. You also wrote that initially you didn't just go off to Spain and have this great time and stay in that frame of mind, you wrote that you thought you'd stay in bed for a year.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Oh yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: You thought you'd tell your doctor you'll have no trouble reaching me there's a phone next to my bed, don't call during nap time. I'll be there, which is, by the way, dawn to dusk followed closely by bedtime. I thought well that's a pretty appropriate reaction.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I thought this is the best excuse I ever heard to do nothing. Our teacher at school, I was a room parent that year which is the most difficult job on the planet in my opinion. The teacher said, I've heard about your diagnosis and I think you should step down. I'm so sorry but I think you should step down. I treated it very seriously and I said well if I have to, and I left the room thinking thank you God for giving me cancer so I don't have to be a room parent anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: Before we go back to some of the things that people said to you that all you can do is roll your eyes and ask people in your book to not say them to people who have a cancer diagnosis is that you also did what my friends who have gotten cancer did is that you blamed yourself.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Oh sure, oh sure. You can't help but think that obesity is a factor in breast cancer that must be it. Or, it's not like I never smoked a cigarette in my life even know that's long past, maybe that's what it was. There must be something I've done.

JEANNE BLAKE: Sometimes it's an irrational concern. My friend Liz told me with a straight face one day, she said, do you think it's because I ate so much hot sauce? She was just dead serious, she was just scanning her brain for what did I do to deserve this?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely. Absolutely. Of course, it's a pointless exercise but we all do it. If the world of science has not figured out what causes breast cancer, chances are we won't either however much guilt we put on ourselves. The shorter you can make that period, the better.

JEANNE BLAKE: You write about the thoughtless comments that people made to you.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: That didn't help, by the way, in the blame game.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Right. I started collected the things that people say and this is actually how the book started. I asked my chemo nurse how do you advise people when they come to you and ask you how to handle people and she said, if you figure it out, let me know because everybody asks about it. I finally discovered this explanation that helped me so much and has comforted me so much. If I tell my best friend that I now have a cancer diagnosis, she's thinking of me, she's not thinking of herself. If I tell a total stranger, they hear the word cancer and they immediately go somewhere else. You may as well be on a different planet because they're thinking about Aunt Sophie who died of breast cancer. So the first thing out of their mouth is going to be about Aunt Sophie. So it's going to be you know my aunt died just at your age of exactly your diagnosis.

JEANNE BLAKE: Thanks, right?

MONIQUE SPENCER: And it was terrible. It was a terrible way to go. What I finally realized is I've said all of these stupid things to other people.

JEANNE BLAKE: There were others?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Oh yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: My cousin didn't miss a day of work during her treatment. Thanks again, right?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: This is my favorite. My sister's husband left her and she still raised her seven children and didn't miss a day of work. And then there's the "My friend climbed Mount Everest."

MONIQUE SPENCER: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: None of them are helpful.

MONIQUE SPENCER: People like to, I think they believe that they are inspiring you and I think it's a fundamental misunderstanding about what inspires people. I think what inspires people is a feeling that you can beat the expectations so you set your expectations. You go higher than that bar and you feel great. When somebody tells you that Mount Everest is the goal, you might climb K-2 and you're still not going to feel proud of yourself.

JEANNE BLAKE: What I like too is that you do offer the words that people can say. I think that's really important and I want you to share those.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I say it at least once a day that what I will say to someone is enough about me; tell me how you're doing?

JEANNE BLAKE: Change the subject.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, I always change the subject.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because they probably are more than happy to not be talking about it because a lot of the fear either negative memories, sad memories, or their own fear that makes them say something so spontaneous that they don't think about it.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely. Understanding that made me not feel so angry all the time because I did feel angry that people were saying these things to me. People would say, oh there's so many cures now you have nothing to worry about. I had Stage III breast cancer at that point, I had something to worry about. But people love to say, oh it's nothing nowadays, you'll be fine. I did finally understand they mean well most of time, there's some evil people but most people mean well. That was a great comfort because it released all of that anger and irritation that I was feeling.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, that's interesting actually. Then you also offer more helpful words things that people can say and I like this. You're such a great person, I hate to hear that this is happening to you.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's just like, that's so easy and so good and it's sharing your care.

MONIQUE SPENCER: That's all you need to hear.

JEANNE BLAKE: When I was reading and then you followed that up with what's the best thing that I can do to help you?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: I really want to talk about that because people that are listening to this, I think it's always important to help them understand how they can really help.

MONIQUE SPENCER: It's a big subject. In fact I have a book coming out on it in September.

JEANNE BLAKE: Oh great.

MONIQUE SPENCER: The sentence, call me if you need anything.

JEANNE BLAKE: Not going to happen.

MONIQUE SPENCER: We all say it. Nobody's ever in the history of cancer gotten a call back that somebody needs something. I think it's because we feel we should be able to cope on our own. We feel oh, you don't really mean it. The basic approach that I suggest to people is that you don't bother saying call me if you need anything. Offer the person a choice between two things that you are willing to do and that are kind of easy for you to do. If you really don't want to go to church with somebody or Synagogue, don't offer that. If you don't mind doing the grocery shopping, offer that. So you might say, I'm going out on a grocery shopping trip, let me swing by and I'll pick up your list. Or, I'm going to bring dinner, do you want it tomorrow night or do you want it tonight? Or, I'll take the kids to soccer practice, is it Thursday or Friday that's best for you. So you are always giving them a choice of two positive alternatives. It's an old sales technique. When a car dealer says to you so do you like this car in the silver or the blue? As soon as you say silver, he sees sold because you've taken away the big decision and you've made it a little one and believe it or not this works.

JEANNE BLAKE: A friend of mine lost her daughter, her daughter was 21 or 22 and when I read in your book about this whole what can I do, and let me know if I can do something, she said, I'm going to write a book about what people can do when they really want to be helpful. She said right at

the top of the list is going to be come over and clean out my refrigerator. Just some practical thing, that will really help and not let me know if there's something I can do for the very same reason that you described.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely. And someone in her shoes is dealing with a far more serious problem than a cancer diagnosis but I think that the principals are the same.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

MONIQUE SPENCER: If you know that, if for example, if she's going to feel she's having to go to the airport and pick up family who are coming in, offer to do that for her. Take the car and fill it with gas. Get it cleaned. Have the house cleaned if she wants to. Offer to take, if she's got visitors coming who are really horrible house guests, offer to take them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Oh, Lord.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Or put them up at a hotel.

JEANNE BLAKE: At any time, by the way.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: But then you felt an emerging optimism that really surprised you.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, it really did. I had planned to go to bed for a year and then when I began to hear that people with positive attitudes live longer than people who don't. I dismissed that. I really did as yet another burden to put on cancer patients. The Mayo clinic came out with a study in which they actually proved that optimists live longer than pessimists which of course didn't surprise the pessimists at all. When I thought about that, I thought about what does a positive attitude really mean? Is it that I have to walk around in sunshine and smiley buttons all the time and what I came to understand is that this magical positive attitude is this. You believe your life is worth living. That positive attitude doesn't cure cancer it keeps you going back for treatment. That's really what I think the positive attitude is all about. It keeps you trying treatment. The first time you go for chemo doesn't take a lot of courage, the fifth time you go, takes a little bit, takes some guts and if you believe

that your life is fundamentally worth living and you want to be there for it, that positive attitude is what's going to help you survive.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think it's a little tricky and you do address this that that some people don't survive cancer and you don't want to give the message well, they just didn't think the right way.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Right, right. The truth is there are plenty of really horrible people who live to be 95 and we all know them. You wonder why didn't God just give them a way out a few years ago, and then you meet some incredible person who dies of a very aggressive cancer at the age of 30. There is no rhyme or reason for it. I don't believe that a positive attitude can save your life. I think that it can make it as long as possible and I think also it helps you to live your life so that you're not dying. I had a good friend who had cancer for a long time that was terminal. From the beginning it was a terminal diagnosis and it took about a year before he died. What I was so impressed by is that he didn't spend one second dying. All of it was spent truly living.

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you think of the, I know a lot of people who are well who are not living.

MONIQUE SPENCER: There's a lot to it. I think that the Courage Muscle is really a road to happiness. That waking up this courage muscle in yourself to me at the end of the day is really a way to find a happier life whether you've dealt with loss, grief, cancer, illness, loss of a job, loss of anything that causes you grief. A lot of it is the unfortunate truth that you are what you think about. We all go through stages of life when you get up in the morning and all you think about is I hate this job that I have to do all day. I hate the chores that I have to do all day. All you think about is, oh, I'm so fat, or I'm so old, or I'm so unsuccessful or I just can't do well. Well, that's who you are. So you spend, the more time you spend thinking about those things, the more you fill your brain, and the less room there is for happiness and confidence. One of the exercises and this is tough for me because I'm happy to sit around and mope all day and complain but I began to learn that when you get up in the morning, you make a choice. What are you going to think about today? It doesn't always succeed. I have plenty of days that I sit around saying things to my husband like I'm not sure if I'm going to be cremated or if I want to be buried in my really nice blue dress. I have those days of saying those things.

JEANNE BLAKE: I understand.

MONIQUE SPENCER: But basically you are what you think about and it's a very tough thing to reprogram.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's very tough. I know that lots of people are reading a lot of the current books now about how positive attracts positive and I think it just takes a concerted effort in the world we live in, cancer or not, and I just was really curious about how you do that on a day-to-day basis when you find yourself being in a negative place.

MONIQUE SPENCER: You start over every day. You really do. You start over every day.

JEANNE BLAKE: Monique, you mentioned your children earlier. You were honest with them from the beginning about your diagnosis. I've talked on this program actually with people who lost a parent and never had that open, honest discussion and it's really robbing a child by not including them.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely.

JEANNE BLAKE: I just would like to hear how you spoke with them about it and how you do speak with them about your cancer and ongoing quests.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, well of course it depends on their age group. We had the 13-year old and the 8 year old. The 8-year old who is now 16 recently told me that she had no idea that cancer kills people because she never heard me act like that or speak that way. And it wasn't that I sugar coated it, I told them that this is serious, I have something that's making me sick but I'm going to do everything my doctor asks me to do. I'm going to do everything that I can do get rid of this. I'm going to take some medicine that's not like amoxicillin. It's going to do funny things like make my hair fall out. But I'm going to be okay and I'm going to keep you informed and anything that happens in the meantime I will tell you about. That's basically the approach, is to keep it low drama, low key but honest because the kids know what's going on. They notice that the phone rings more often. You're all of a sudden getting a bunch of greeting cards, they want to know why. They go into your office and look at them and they see all of these "sorry you're having a hard time" cards so they're going to know whether you tell them or not, they're going to know.

JEANNE BLAKE: Even young children don't like to be underestimated.

MONIQUE SPENCER: No.

JEANNE BLAKE: For their ability to handle something.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I was with both my parents at the moment of death. Very few people experience that nowadays because very few people die at home. But that was a gift that I think is one of the greatest gifts of my life because it gave me the opportunity to see that people who are about to die don't look afraid. The rest of us are afraid of death. People who are standing right at the door don't look afraid. They don't look happy, but they don't look afraid and that kind of helped me in my attitude with my own children. I wanted them to see that these things are challenges, they are not insurmountable. I recently had to tell them that the cancer had returned and that it's a little bit more serious now. The kids are a little bit older now. They are more aware of the prospects. I think they are in the same place as they were then. They know it's serious but they know I'm going to do everything I can and then I'll tell them. I think one thing that people expect is that this will create a magical change in your kids. So, you're going to be really disappointed if you are expecting that. So if you are expecting that the kid who doesn't make their bed is going to make their bed.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was just going to say suddenly their room will be clean because they want to please mom.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Forget it. It doesn't seem to happen.

JEANNE BLAKE: You really want your children to be able to have their lives be as normal as possible. That's important.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes. Absolutely.

JEANNE BLAKE: You write about a number of coping mechanisms. One is find out who you are and directly ask people that you trust to share their observations of you. Why can that be helpful? And how did you do that and what did you get back?

MONIQUE SPENCER: Well, I learned this trick from my sister-in-law and she does this very successfully. I found it kind of hard to do because I felt like I was fishing for compliments. So I only asked people that I thought would be honest with me. I didn't want anybody who was going to say, oh you're so brave and everything about you is great. I asked people what do you think I'm good at?

Can you think of something I'm good at? People said well, you're good in a crisis. You stay calm in a crisis. I remembered that so anytime that things felt like a crisis, when I was going through this, I had this memory of you're good at this. When that happens in a moment, it's really powerful. If somebody has said to you, you have a great way of making other people feel better you're going to do that. You're going to remember it and you're going to do it. But you have to ask the right people.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

MONIQUE SPENCER: People who will really be honest.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly. Otherwise you'll feel like you did when they say oh, my friend's husband left her.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Right, right.

JEANNE BLAKE: You want to punch them. The other thing that you call a coping mechanism is setting goals. I just want to go through some of these and have you say why you wrote these down as your goals. On most days I look for something that reminds me of how wonderful life can be and how much I have to live for. You kind of addressed this before.

MONIQUE SPENCER: That's ultimately where I started thinking you are what you think about.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, Okay.

MONIQUE SPENCER: My goal was to have something every day that did remind me of that and eventually that grew into you are what you think about. It started very small so it might start with I'm really glad there's a Three Stooges marathon on Channel 38 tonight. Or it might be something more profound about my children or my husband or about life in general.

JEANNE BLAKE: Your second goal that you write about is on most days I will ask my body to do a little more than it wants to.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, there's no, the unfortunate mess of our universe is that the greatest cure for fatigue is exercise which I just find on my list of things to talk to God about that we all

have, that's my biggest one. So I'm feeling fatigue, I'm exhausted but the only cure for that is exercise. But I try to do that. So whether it was post-surgery when you really don't feel like walking, taking a walk or whether it was far past surgery doing some weight lifting even though I didn't feel like doing that. It's a real life affirming thing to push your body just a little bit is a really life affirming thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: I can understand that. You know that it makes you feel that you are alive that you're moving.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: On most days, goal number 3, I will do one small thing for someone else.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes. It's really easy when you have cancer to become a princess. Very easy. People are making you meals. People are feeling sorry for you and it's very easy to lie back on the chaise lounge with a box of bon-bons and let everybody minister to you. But your friends continue to have their normal lives and so it's important to remember every day gee, how's so and so doing. She was really down the last time I saw her or maybe so and so could use a lunch date. Why don't I set that up?

JEANNE BLAKE: And it also I would think distracts you from you own, whatever's in your head.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, goal number 4 out of 5: On most days I will do something to challenge my brain.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes. Chemo brain is a real thing. It gives you a little bit of fogginess and I've found that doing something that made my brain work a little bit was very good for me. In my case I started with the New York Times crossword puzzle. In the beginning I could only do Monday, you know it gets progressively difficult. I've stuck with it religiously, I have to do it before I leave the house in the morning and worked my way up to Saturday and Sunday being more like a Thursday difficulty but I worked my way up through that. I try to remain curious. When we traveled I try to remain interested in the world around me but there is a little bit of fogginess that you get.

JEANNE BLAKE: And the final one, I think it's the final one, yes, on most days I'll think about my family and friends and not just me. Which goes back into kind of

MONIQUE SPENCER: The princess problem.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, exactly.

MONIQUE SPENCER: You get mighty spoiled. You really do.

JEANNE BLAKE: If you're lucky I guess. I mean there are some people I think that really struggle with cancer and feel very much alone. You had tremendous support around you.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes. I felt very, very, very fortunate. The interesting thing is that most people in a neighborhood do want to help when they find out that somebody's ill. But they don't necessarily have the relationships to get it organized. So if you're lucky there's somebody in your life who sparks that for you.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right, that's right. Yet it's quite something to see because and it brings me to this line that I never thought about this. That treatment ending is actually very hard.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: Emotionally hard. One of the subtitles was: "Where did all the casseroles go?" So thus a princess no more.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely.

JEANNE BLAKE: In people's eyes.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Absolutely.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think most people that haven't been through that wouldn't understand that. They'd think what a huge relief.

MONIQUE SPENCER: You would expect it to be a huge relief and it is because you're done with the treatment, you're done with the physical part. But now you have this life looming ahead of you and you're no longer quite as bald and you don't have the physical signs of cancer. I'm finding it interesting right now when I have a very serious form of cancer but I have no outward signs of it because the chemotherapy doesn't make you bald.

JEANNE BLAKE: Meaning that, I don't know if we've mentioned that, that you have a recurrence now.

MONIQUE SPENCER: Yes, I have a recurrence that's throughout my spine and it is interesting to live with cancer and not have anybody particularly pick up on it because I don't have any symptoms of it. Even when I had cancer before, I have very Irish skin. I look like Santa Clause so even when in the worst of chemo when you get that really grey skin I still looked really pink so I always looked really healthy in chemo. But I think that there is several problems at the end of treatment. One is you are no longer surrounded by doctors.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

MONIQUE SPENCER: It's a lot like the first time your pediatrician says I'll see you in a year when you've been coming every couple of months and you think we'll who's going to make sure my baby's okay. It's a very similar feeling. But it's the biggest time to bring in the method about you are what you think about. I have heard from the speeches that I give many people have said to me how do I stop thinking about cancer? My first answer is put on a pair of tight shoes tomorrow morning and you'll stop thinking about cancer or any other problems that you have. It really is about gratitude for the life that you have gratitude for the people in it. Joy for the life that you have and what you think about.

JEANNE BLAKE: Perfect words to end on. I want to thank you for coming in. Thank you for writing this book. I got a lot out of it. I laughed out loud. I love it.

MONIQUE SPENCER: I'm so glad.

JEANNE BLAKE: Again, it's "*The Courage Muscle, a Chicken's Guide to Living with Breast Cancer.*" And you are certainly a chicken no more. Thank you.

MONIQUE SPENCER:                   And great to be here.

JEANNE BLAKE:                    I hope you come back when you're new book is published.

MONIQUE SPENCER:                Thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE:                    And we wish you well.

MONIQUE SPENCER:                Thank you to you to.

JEANNE BLAKE:                    And we thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake and I'll see you next time.