



# A hand to HOLD

Patient navigators like Felicia Mahone provide essential emotional support to help women beat disease.

BY JANE BIANCHI



Not long ago, Felicia Mahone was keeping a mother of four company during a tedious, hours-long chemo treatment, when the woman—who was alone in the hospital because her kids were at home with their grandma—said to her: “We’re so grateful to you. Since my mom can’t be in two places at once, she says that you ease her mind by taking care of me.”

That kind of interaction is what keeps Felicia, 34, committed to her work. As a patient navigator through the Avon Foundation at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, she provides support to six breast cancer patients—attending doctors’ appointments with them, visiting before and after surgeries, and checking in by phone so they can vent their feelings about what they’re going

through. She devotes anywhere from 1 to 6 hours per week to her duties and is paid a stipend of \$200 a month. (She also works full-time at a daycare facility in the area.)

Felicia, unfortunately, knows all too well what it’s like to go through a traumatic time without a huge support network. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007 at age 27, Felicia was terrified—her mother died of the disease in 1990, when she was just 29. At least, Felicia thought, she had relatives who would help her through the 12 months of treatment, which included a mastectomy, chemotherapy and ovary removal. But most didn’t visit her in the hospital. “Once, I needed a blood transfusion, and nobody was by my side. I was so scared,” she recalls. “I understand that some people are

“I was sick, scared and alone. I want to ensure that no patient ever feels like I did during treatment.”

afraid of hospitals, and others just block out things they don’t want to deal with. But I’ll never forget that feeling.”

Three years ago, finally cancer-free, Felicia heard about the navigator program. She quickly signed up and completed the 8-hour training. “I thought this might be my chance to reconcile that awful feeling of being sick, scared and alone,” says Felicia. “I wanted to ensure that no patient would ever

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## FIGHTING BREAST CANCER *Inspiration*



Natasha Brown (left), one of Felicia's patients, greets her in the hospital.

feel like I did during treatment.”

Because of her experience, she is in a unique position to answer patients' questions about treatment and recovery honestly and help assuage their fears. Felicia says that simply being there provides hope too. “They can see that I'm still standing,” she says.

She also assists with practical matters that can be stressful. For example, if a patient needs her medicine but doesn't have a car, Felicia drives to the pharmacy to pick it up for her. If she needs a

wig, Felicia recommends where to buy one. And if a woman is struggling financially, Felicia helps her find ways to save in other areas to better pay for care.

And sometimes patients just need a break from dealing with illness, and Felicia lightens the mood by asking about their families, friends and hobbies.

“Every meeting or phone call is such a great reminder that what you do for others is more important than what they can do for you,” says Felicia.

## Get Involved

If you'd like to be a patient navigator, **ask a social worker at your local hospital** if it offers a training program and how you can enroll. To learn more about this growing field, subscribe to the e-newsletter at [patientnavigator.com](http://patientnavigator.com) or sign up for membership in the National Association of Healthcare Advocacy Consultants ([NAHAC.com](http://NAHAC.com)).