



FAITH, STRENGTH, AND SURVIVAL: MUSLIM WOMEN'S CANCER JOURNEYS FROM BRADFORD

A collection of voices, resilience, and healing

2024

Foreword

Following our Tea and Chat group sessions on the topic of Cancer, we felt it was important to capture the lived experiences shared by the women attending.

This is a tribute to every woman and family affected by cancer. It honours those who have survived, those supporting loved ones, and those we have lost.

We hope these stories bring comfort, connection and courage to all who read them.

Dedication

To the women who have fought bravely, the loved ones who stood beside them, and the memories that linger in every heartbeat, we honour your strength, your resilience, and your stories. May these pages serve as a testament to your courage and a source of comfort, remembrance, and hope.

Acknowledgements

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Special gratitude to the Safeena Muslim Cancer Support Network for the compassionate care and community you provide. We also thank Kunafa Tea Café for offering a space to share meals and stories with warmth and dignity.

Our heartfelt appreciation to hospital staff, care workers, nurses and doctors—your kindness and commitment shine brightest during the hardest moments.

Introduction

Cancer can be shrouded in silence within some communities. This collection breaks that silence. These are not simply accounts of illness, but stories of faith, family, survival and the resilience of the human spirit.



Bradford's Muslim women are pillars of their families and communities, yet their voices are seldom at the centre of cancer conversations. This anthology brings them to the fore, reflecting their experiences within their cultural and spiritual environments.

Stories were shared at our Tea and Chat sessions.

Core themes

- Visibility – giving space to voices too often overlooked
- Breaking stigma – showing the importance of dialogue around cancer
- Empowerment – encouraging action and support
- Faith – as a source of strength, grounding and healing
- Healing – in mind, body and community

The Stories

Family Power: A Daughter's Account

by Leila Taha, Age 36, Mixed White British- Pakistani

Leila Taha has lived a life marked by strength and resilience. Since moving to Egypt in 2007, she has worked in the education field, contributing to the growth and learning of countless students. In 2021, she made the heartfelt decision to return to the UK, a decision shaped by the profound experiences her family endured during her stepfather Tim's battle with cancer.



The journey began in October 2019 when Tim was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer.

For over a year before his diagnosis, he had struggled with unexplained health issues, including severe digestive problems. A fortuitous scan—one that extended beyond its original scope—revealed the devastating diagnosis. Tim was given a life expectancy of one to two years. For the family, the news was shattering. Leila and her daughter flew to the UK immediately to be by his side, offering support and love during the initial weeks of understanding what lay ahead.

Tim began chemotherapy and immunotherapy, a gruelling process that brought with it immense fatigue and sickness. Despite these challenges, Tim remained overwhelmingly positive, a trait that inspired those around him. He focused not on his own struggles but on the loved ones he would leave behind. His resilience became a source of strength for the entire family.

Leila and her family returned to the UK for Christmas that year, creating cherished memories during a two-week visit. When the COVID-19

pandemic struck, Tim and Leila's mother found themselves in their own little bubble. Her mother became Tim's primary caregiver, ensuring he had everything he needed—from favourite meals to quiet walks when he felt strong enough. Tim, a former head teacher and passionate musician, found solace in music. During the summer months of the pandemic, he played guitar and sang on the patio overlooking the canal, entertaining neighbours and fulfilling song requests through Facebook Live. These performances brought joy to many and created lasting memories for Leila, who watched from afar.

As travel restrictions tightened and Egypt was added to the UK's red list, Leila acted quickly, securing last-minute tickets to spend what she knew might be the last summer with Tim. Work and school were understanding, allowing Leila and her daughter to spend nine invaluable weeks with him and her mother. The family focused on creating as many moments of joy and normalcy as possible. Saying goodbye at the end of that summer was one of the hardest moments of Leila's life. Knowing she might never see Tim again, she asked him to take the shahada, the Muslim declaration of faith. Though not religious, Tim agreed, giving her a small sense of peace amidst the heartbreak.

Tim passed away peacefully on October 4, 2020, just two days before Leila's daughter's birthday. The call from her mother, confirming what Leila had dreaded, was a moment she would never forget. Despite the expectation of loss, nothing could prepare her for its finality. Leila and her daughter immediately flew back to the UK, with her husband joining later for the funeral. COVID restrictions limited attendance to 20 people, a stark contrast to the hundreds who would have attended in normal times. The family planned a larger memorial gathering for the future to honour Tim's memory properly.

The journey through cancer taught the family many lessons about love, resilience, and the importance of cherishing time together. It also deepened their gratitude for the care and compassion shown by the NHS and Tim's medical team. Cancer is a cruel disease that indiscriminately takes away the ones we love, but it also highlights the strength of the human spirit and the unbreakable bonds of family.

In the aftermath, Leila and her family chose to prioritize being close to their loved ones, deciding to move back to the UK permanently. Life is too short, and their experience underscored the value of being present for one another through life's most challenging moments.

Many people can deeply relate to the struggles families face during these journeys. Watching loved ones go through such profound changes is incredibly challenging. It places a significant emotional, physical, and mental strain on family members, as they strive to balance their own well-being with the desire to provide the best care and comfort possible.

The journey is never the same for everyone, but the emotional core—the love, the pain, and the hope to make their remaining days, weeks, or months as meaningful and comfortable as possible—remains universally relatable.

Having a strong support network is vital during these times. Whether it's family, friends, or community resources, leaning on others can make the burden more manageable and provide the strength to keep going.

Reflections:

- Cherishing each moment becomes central
- Family and community ties offer vital support
- Faith can bring profound comfort even in final day

Facing Death and Finding Hope

by Yasmin Kader, Age 60, British Pakistani.

Yasmin's Journey Through Stage 4 Breast Cancer

Yasmin shared her powerful and inspiring story about her battle with stage 4 breast cancer—a journey that brought her face-to-face with death and ultimately led to her survival against all odds. Her experience highlighted the roles of faith, community, and medical care in overcoming life's greatest challenges.

Yasmin expressed her deep belief that her survival was part of God's plan. Throughout her journey, the prayers and unwavering support from her family, friends, and community sustained her spirit. She credited her

strong faith in God as a cornerstone of her resilience, giving her the strength to persevere through the most difficult times.

Yasmin's gratitude for the NHS staff was immense. She highlighted the crucial roles played by her GP, the surgeons, and the chemotherapy team. Their expertise and compassion made an incredible difference during her treatment. She noted that the NHS staff supported her not only physically but also emotionally, guiding her through each step of the challenging process.



Yasmin shared an important piece of advice about being prepared for the unexpected. During her journey, she ensured her affairs were in order, including writing a will. She emphasized that while preparing for the worst may be uncomfortable, it is a necessary step for peace of mind in the face of uncertainty.

Even healthcare professionals were astonished by Yasmin's victory against cancer, often commenting on her unwavering positivity. She attributed her survival to staying hopeful and maintaining a positive

outlook, even during the darkest days. Her determination served as a reminder of the profound impact a positive mindset can have on health and recovery.

Through her journey, Yasmin grew closer to God, finding strength and solace in her faith. She concluded her talk with an important message: the necessity of paying attention to our health. She advised everyone to perform regular health checks and to never ignore signs that might indicate illness, including cancer. Early detection and prompt action can save lives, as her story so powerfully demonstrates.

Reflections:

- Early detection can be lifesaving
- NHS and private options can complement each other
- Never assume “no symptoms” means no risk



Unexpected Diagnosis, Unwavering Spirit

by Caroline Sanderson, Age 65, White British.

In 2022, Caroline decided it might be time to step away from her career as a project manager in the tech industry. After many years in the field, she felt ready to embrace a quieter life with her husband and their beloved dogs in their new home. In 2021, the couple had relocated from the south coast of England to West Yorkshire, returning to a place they cherished.

As part of settling into their new life, Caroline registered at a local GP surgery. By a stroke of luck, she was sent for a routine mammogram two years earlier than usual. She had no symptoms—no lump, no pain—so the results were unexpected and concerning: the mammogram revealed cancer cells.

The diagnosis led to a lumpectomy, confirming the presence of cancer. Fortunately, the type of cancer she had did not require chemotherapy, which came as a great relief. However, surgery to remove the lump and subsequent radiotherapy were necessary. Caroline was fortunate to have private health insurance through her job, allowing her to undergo treatment at a private clinic, where the operation was scheduled promptly.

On the day of the surgery, her husband and sister accompanied her to the hospital. The operation was a success, with the cancer completely removed. After a few weeks of recovery, she began radiotherapy treatments in Leeds. The process was physically demanding; the area to be treated was tattooed, and she found it quite sore throughout the sessions. Despite this discomfort, Caroline felt incredibly grateful. She had the support of her family, and the entire process—thanks to early detection and private healthcare—was smooth and straightforward.

Looking back, Caroline often reflects on how differently things might have turned out had she not moved to Yorkshire. Without the early mammogram, the cancer could have progressed unnoticed until her next routine screening. She now strongly advocates for the importance of mammograms, emphasizing that her cancer was detected long before any lump appeared.

Caroline's story is one of gratitude and perspective. She considers herself fortunate to have had access to early detection, efficient healthcare, and the unwavering support of loved ones during her journey.

Reflections:

- Early detection can be lifesaving
- NHS and private options can complement each other
- Never assume “no symptoms” means no risk

Two Journeys, One Message

by Firzana Ahmed and Safeena Khan, Ages 52 & 54, Both British Pakistani.

Firzana's Journey

Firzana, a police officer, was living her regular life until she decided to perform a routine self-check in the shower, discovering a small lump. Panicked, she immediately sought medical advice. Following a series of tests, including a biopsy and mammogram, her consultant informed her of a stage 3 breast cancer diagnosis.

Her initial fears revolved around her family and children, but her medical team reassured her with a treatment plan. Surgery came first, requiring two operations to fully remove the tumour. This was followed by six chemotherapy sessions and 20 rounds of radiotherapy. Firzana described chemotherapy as physically and emotionally draining but recognized it as essential to her fight against cancer.

Breaking the news to her children was especially challenging, explaining that "mummy would get sick before getting better" and preparing them for visible changes like hair loss. Despite their struggles, the experience strengthened her family bonds.

Firzana emphasized the critical role of early detection, urging others to perform regular self-checks, especially one week after their period. She shared how her faith, community support, and the NHS's compassionate care helped her navigate the journey.



Her message was clear: "Cancer is a lottery nobody wants to win, but early detection can make all the difference." Firzana is committed to raising awareness and encouraging conversations about cancer, especially in her community.

Safeena's Journey

Safeena's cancer journey began during the COVID-19 lockdown. She initially noticed a lump in her throat but dismissed it as insignificant despite experiencing occasional food getting stuck and mild indigestion. After three endoscopies and multiple rounds of antibiotics, her symptoms persisted.

It wasn't until she spotted an unusual contour on her neck while brushing her teeth that she decided to take it seriously. Following her GP's urgent referral, a hospital scan confirmed a stage 3 throat tumour. Having cared for her parents during their battles with cancer, Safeena had an inkling of what lay ahead but still felt unprepared.

The lockdown exacerbated the challenges, isolating her from loved ones and delaying surgery. She was forced to confront her fears alone, unable to have her husband or family by her side during crucial appointments. Her diagnosis forced her to reevaluate priorities, including pausing plans to open a flower shop she had poured her heart into.

The path to recovery was tumultuous: delays in surgery, losing her voice post-operation, and a recurrence of cancer. Her faith, which wavered initially, deepened through these trials. A transformative experience



during Umrah—a pilgrimage her husband insisted on—helped her regain strength and acceptance.

Despite the repeated setbacks and another surgery, Safeena's resolve only grew stronger. Her journey reshaped her perspective on life, detaching her from material things and focusing on faith, family, and resilience. By 2023, she fulfilled her dream of opening her shop, a testament to her determination.

Reflections:

- Self-checks and prompt GP visits matter
- Family honesty and preparation support healing
- Faith journeys can be transformative
- Recovery is a mosaic of emotional, spiritual and practical rebuilding

Afterword

Cancer is more than a medical condition—it's a shared journey of love, resilience and renewal. These voices show us that discussing cancer leads to healing, awareness and unity. Their experiences highlight the vital impact of faith, community and cultural context in the journey through diagnosis and recovery.

Lessons We Take Forward

- Detect early: Pay attention and seek help promptly.
- Lean on faith and community: Don't walk through hardship alone.
- Break the silence: Talking empowers and unites.
- Educate and support: Share knowledge and offer care.



Guidance for Cancer Programmes

UK Cancer Screening Programmes

Early detection saves lives. The NHS provides free cancer screening programmes for eligible individuals across the UK. Here's what's currently available:

1. Breast Cancer Screening

- **Who:** Women aged 50 to 70 (extended in some areas to 47 to 73)
- **How often:** Every 3 years
- **What it involves:** Mammogram (breast X-ray)
- **Notes:** Women over 70 can request a screening

2. Cervical Cancer Screening

- **Who:** Women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 64
- **How often:**
 - Every 3 years (ages 25–49)
 - Every 5 years (ages 50–64)
- **What it involves:** Cervical smear test to detect HPV and cell changes

3. Bowel Cancer Screening

- **Who:** Everyone aged 60 to 74 (gradually expanding to include 50–59)
- **How often:** Every 2 years
- **What it involves:** At-home FIT kit (faecal immunochemical test)
- **Notes:** People over 75 can request a kit

4. Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Screening

- **Who:** Men aged 65+
- **How often:** Once (one-time ultrasound scan)
- **What it involves:** Detects swelling in the aorta that can rupture if left untreated

Note for Muslim communities: None of these screenings invalidate wudu or require compromising modesty beyond clinical necessity. Speak to your GP if you have cultural or religious concerns—they can offer female practitioners or chaperones.

Support Networks and Healthcare Resources

These organisations provide vital support, information, and guidance for people living with or affected by cancer:

General Cancer Support

- **Macmillan Cancer Support**
 www.macmillan.org.uk
 0808 808 00 00 (7 days a week, 8am–8pm)
Advice, financial help, emotional support
- **Cancer Research UK**
 www.cancerresearchuk.org
 0300 123 1022
Research, prevention tips, understanding your diagnosis
- **Marie Curie**
 www.mariecurie.org.uk
 0800 090 2309
End-of-life care, bereavement support

Faith-Sensitive & Community-Based Support

- **Safeena Muslim Cancer Support Network (Bradford)**
 info@safeenasupport.org.uk
 (Local listing – Bradford-based)
Culturally sensitive support and local women’s groups
- **Muslim Women’s Network UK**
 www.mwnuk.co.uk
 0121 236 9000
Confidential advice and advocacy for health, faith, and wellbeing
- **British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA)**
 www.britishima.org
Health education tailored to Muslim communities

Mental Health & Emotional Support

- **Mind**
 www.mind.org.uk
 0300 123 3393
Support with depression, anxiety, or trauma after diagnosis
- **NHS Talking Therapies (England)**
 www.nhs.uk/talk
Free local counselling and support—self-referral available

Local NHS Services

- **NHS 111** (non-emergency medical help):  Dial **111**
- **GP Surgeries:** Register with your local surgery for access to referrals and screenings
- **Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust**
 www.bradfordhospitals.nhs.uk
Local oncology, screening, and care pathways

Helplines in Urdu and Other Languages

Some charities offer interpreters. When calling:

- Ask for an interpreter in your language (e.g., Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali)
- Or request a female practitioner if needed for comfort

**Report created by the Tea & Chat participants
supported by the MWC Team**

