Getting Back On Track After Testicular Cancer

by JUSTIN BIRCKBICHLER

Life After Testicular Cancer

If you were to meet me prior to October 2016, I would appear to be a typical guy in his mid-twenties. I had just bought my first house, had a full-time job, and had two testicles. Fast forward three months and one of these had changed. I was neither unemployed or homeless now, so you do the math.

Thanks to a bout with testicular cancer, I had now found myself one pilot short of a full cockpit. Furthermore, my lymph nodes and internal organs had been being fully lit up by twenty-one treatments of platinum-based chemotherapy, which is a lot less glamorous than most platinum-based activities.

After grabbing cancer by the ball(s) and beating that beast, I was ready to settle back into my regularly scheduled programming of being a normal guy again. However, what they don't include in the helpful "What to Expect When You're Expecting to Lose a Testicle" pamphlet is the changes you encounter after facing testicular cancer – and it's not just about how you're 50 percent more aerodynamic.

Life doesn't just "get back to normal" after cancer. It's chapter two in the book of your life. I had to develop strategies that would help me to embrace my "New Normal."

Find an Outlet to Process What You Went Through

If I had to pick something "good" about my chemotherapy experience, it would be that it was not a long and drawn out process. The aforementioned twenty-one treatments were crammed into a ten week period. In fact, from initially discovering a lump on my testicle to being declared in remission, less than five months had passed. For comparison's sake, it took me my whole junior year of high school to gain the most basic of understanding of chemistry.

However, this silver lining is more of a fool's gold. To go from "Hey, I'm perfectly healthy" to "I could die" to "No wait, I am healthy again" in a matter of five months is a lot to process. Often times, you can't even process while it's happening because you're so focused on the next medical step that your mental wellbeing takes a backseat.

While the dust was settling (which is a pretty apt analogy since Thanos 'dusted' half of the universe in *Avengers: Infinity War* and my urologist removed half my testicles), I needed to find an outlet to process everything. I had already been writing about my experiences with testicular cancer on my website "A Ballsy Sense of Tumor," but the focal point of my posts changed after hearing the all clear.

Instead of focusing on my day-to-day, I wrote pieces about how I was healing my mind. Getting my thoughts out of my head and onto paper helped me release the negative notions and focus on moving forward.

Your outlet doesn't have to be writing - find what works for you. Whatever it is, don't bottle it up.

Don’t Be Afraid to Ask for Help in Your Mental Health

Even with therapeutic writing, I still realized that things weren’t necessarily always improving with my mental health. I had gone through depression in high school in 2006, and it dawned on me that I was beginning to experience some of the same symptoms. I wanted to head this off at the pass, so I tried a few different strategies.

I began seeing a therapist, who was great and she gave me a lot of good advice about managing life after cancer and depression. However, she had never experienced cancer first hand, let alone testicular cancer, which isn’t too surprising, considering she has even fewer testicles than me.

I was in therapy for a few weeks, but I never seemed to talk about cancer during sessions. The thing is, my downward spiral about cancer wasn’t something I can talk about at a regularly scheduled time. It comes and goes as it pleases, announcing itself unexpectedly, much like the cancer did. I did give it the old college try, but after about two months, I told her I wouldn’t be returning for any more visits. I hadn’t moved on past my worries and anxieties, but all the therapy was doing was costing me money.

Next page: Don't be afraid to ask for help in your mental health, and more tips on embracing life after testicular cancer.

Don’t Be Afraid to Ask for Help in Your Mental Health

Next, I tried eTC Express, an online therapy program designed specifically for testicular cancer survivors.

Within the program, there are six modules in total: Foundations, After Treatment, Changes, Being A Man, Significant Others, and Moving Forward. While some of the modules were more applicable to me, I still had access to them all.

Each module has a variety of tasks, with some reading of texts, videos, and audio files. The modules focus a lot on putting “tools in your toolbox” to deal with the new life you're now facing. Personally, I think they should have called them “skills in a sack,” but maybe their pun game isn’t as strong. Some of these tools include mindfulness, worry postponement, challenging unhelpful thoughts, and many more. This was more helpful since it was geared right to what I needed, but it still wasn’t enough.

At another clear follow-up scan, I asked if I could go on antidepressants. I knew from previous experience that I respond well to these medicines and they helped balance me in 2006. After a few adjustments and weeks of waiting they paid off and I began feeling like myself again.

Whatever works for you, go for it. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. No one will “judge you” for admitting you’re not feeling yourself - you did just face cancer.

Set Yourself up for Success in Your Long-Term Health

Prior to facing cancer, I was already admittedly out of shape. I was pleasantly plump, to put it nicely, but the combination of maintaining a sedentary lifestyle for the duration of chemo, the steroids that added pounds, and a trip to Hawaii ballooned me up to a record high weight of 215 pounds. Honestly, when I looked in the mirror, I was ashamed of my bloated and flabby body, lack of endurance, and a pitiful amount of strength. I decided to make fitness a priority, so I joined a gym and found sticking with the new habit wasn’t too difficult.

I go directly to the gym after work, which helps me keep the positive momentum going. In the beginning, I found if I come home from work and sit down, I was less likely to get back out there. Now, since I actually looked forward to working out, it doesn’t matter when I go, but I still find the consistency is key.

Since making these changes and improving my diet in August 2017, I’ve shed over forty pounds, dropped over ten percent of my body fat, increased my running stamina, and nearly doubled my maximum lifting stats.

Yet, why I exercise is much more than just the physical benefits. While I am exercising, I often think about what I've been through and what kind of person I want to be. It's an intense moment - both physically and in the reflection aspects - which dovetails nicely with the aforementioned outlet finding.

Physical fitness is a great idea, especially in the case of cancer survivors, since the American Cancer Society recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate activity per week to lower risk of cancer.

Even if you don't kill it at the gym day in and day out, make it a point to incorporate more healthy choices into your lifestyle. You just beat cancer; let's not add obesity, heart disease, or diabetes to the mix.

Share Your Story However You Are Most Comfortable

In my case, I go ball(s) to the walls with running a public website and various social media platforms dedicated to my journey and newfound mission of testicular cancer awareness, but you might want to do it on a more one on one, personal level.

In either case, it's important for two reasons. First, you can be the support for another potential cancer survivor that you may or may not have received when you went through your own battle. There is something so powerful and uplifting to meet someone who has "been there" and made it through to the other side.

The second reason is more critical on a larger scale. Testicular cancer and men's health are not talked about enough in society. According to a 2016 study by the Cleveland Clinic, only three in five men actually go to their annual physical, and just over 40 percent go to the doctor only when they have a serious medical condition. 53 percent of all the men surveyed reported that their health just isn't something they talk about.

My hopes are that sharing my story from beginning to end with an open attitude will stimulate more open discussion and bring a larger focus to men's health in general. Knowing someone who is going through cancer can help make it more real to men who might not otherwise be concerned about their own health.

In summary, I want to be a catalyst to start talking about testicles and men's health in everyday conversation. I want men thinking of me and examining their testicles (hopefully not at the same time, but whatever works).