Joe Bakhmoutski — Simplify Cancer

The founder of Simplify Cancer shares his four tips for living beyond cancer.

March 16, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

Welcome to the Band of Ballers! In this series on ABSOT, I'm turning over control to some other ballsy testicular cancer survivors and patients who have inspired me with their work in advocacy and awareness during and after their diagnosis. This month's feature is all about Joe Bakhmoutski, who founded Simplify Cancer. Enjoy!

It's an honour to be featured on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor — Justin is doing such an incredible job in getting the word out about testicular cancer and uniting us Uniballers. Rock on, Band of Ballers! (Editor's Note: Dawwwww. I swear I don't pay my Band of Ballers to say nice things.)

For me, the fun began in June 2016 a week after my 36th birthday. I reached down in the shower one night, and I suddenly felt a lump, a hard lump on my testicle. A cold shudder went right through me. For the past few weeks, I had been feeling like my underwear had shrunk several sizes (and you know that is NOT a good feeling!). I kept tossing and turning in bed because everything around my groin was so WRONG…

The next morning, I raced to the doctors, and before long, I was in the urologist's office. After doing the… most thorough examination of my privates, he sat me down in the massive armchair opposite his desk and said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but this is definitely cancer."

I could not believe — is this thing for real?
Why me, what have I done to deserve this?! My life was the best it ever had been. I met an amazing woman, we fell in love, and now we have our son, and now THIS…

What if I go through with all that treatment, and suppose it does work, what will my life look like afterwards? Will I still be able to have sex? Have more kids? Do things around our home? And what if I'm going to die?! I was standing on the edge of the abyss, staring down into the depths of the unknown…

While getting through the orchiectomy and 3 rounds of BEP is not a time that I would look back on with any kind of fondness, I will say that dealing with worry, stress and uncertainty has been even tougher. Mental health in and around men and cancer is only starting to come to the forefront. We need it now and not a moment later.

However, I consider myself both lucky and grateful. I feel lucky because there is no way to predict

how things will work out with cancer, and grateful because of the incredible support I received from my immediate family and the medical team who cared for me with respect and dignity.

Things will never be the same after cancer. It changes how you think, your body, even the way you see yourself.

But honestly, I can't imagine myself any other way than the way that I am right now — and cancer is a part of that. I learned a lot about myself and the world around me and I hope that what I share with you now will serve you in some way. Here are four of the biggest life lessons that I got from cancer:

#1 No one knows you the way you know yourself

Isn't it true that most people in your life (your partner, your family, friends, people you work with) want to be there for you when you go through cancer, or any major struggle you're going through? They want to be there for you, but often what they don't know is HOW!

Sometimes they can't pinpoint what it is that's bothering you (even when it's blatantly obvious), or they miss the cues that you're giving them because it's easy to miss something or misunderstand. We sometimes hide our troubles so well that they have no idea about what is REALLY going on, since us guys are particulate astute at putting on a brave face.

Even when they do know that something has gone off the rails, they have no idea what they can do to help! They don't want to do or say the wrong thing, or make you feel worse.

The best thing you can do is guide your people on how they can best support you. Explain where you're at and be direct and as specific as possible about how they can help. I find that if I assume that I'm talking to a five-year-old who has never met me before, I can get through to a person who has known me for years.

So next time I hit a wall (hope I never will though), I am bound to bring up whatever is bothering me with people I care about the most! There's no need to be a hero and downplay what you're going through because in the end, nobody wins — you don't the support you want, and those who care about you are going to feel left out.

#2 No one is as invested in your own wellbeing as you are yourself
We are surrounded by people who care and want what's best for you. They all have opinions and they all think they are right. But in order to do what's right by you, they need to have intimate knowledge of your true self, your values, and where you want to go. There's no one like that in the world — EXCEPT YOU!

You are the only one who knows exactly what's good for you and what isn't, and what you've got to lose if things don't go to plan. Stand up for your way of life because you are the only one who can take on the responsibility.

So whether that's your doctor or your boss, ask the necessary questions, seek different

perspectives, make hard decisions, and follow up to make sure things are moving along. Don't hope for the best because that is when we leave things to chance!

This is true for our health during and after cancer. I put on a heap of weight after taking my steroids during chemo, and losing weight was not easy. I used to make fun of my friends who were into it — you're all sweaty, how can this be any fun?! But going through with exercise physiologist specialising in cancer who prescribed a program tailored just for me as well as a nutritionist who gets cancer has helped me lose 9cm of belly fat! Plus, I now have more energy to do things around home and take care of my family.

More importantly, when you take charge of making critical decisions around your treatment, your recovery and your wellbeing, you put yourself back in control of your life.

#3 No one owes you anything, even when you need it the most
When I wasn't getting calls or texts in my chemo ward, I was sure that it was the hospital jamming the signal! Just to make sure, I dragged my drip with me until I found a landline and called my mobile. Much to my surprise, my phone lit up and started playing its silly jingle.

At that moment I knew nobody was coming. Many people who I was close with for years, some of whom I expected to be my lifelong friends, had disappeared from my life just when I needed them the most… Honestly, that was hard to take. It took me a long time to get over it, to make peace with it, and to find new friends.

But now I accept that not everyone is meant to stay along for the ride. Like a bus that pulls over at various stops along the way, some people get on, and some choose to get off. But you continue moving forward, on your route for the life that you want, and those who want to be there for the ride will stay, and those that don't will get out of the way.

#4 When you commit to something bigger than yourself, worry fades into the background

People expect you to bounce back into life after cancer, but that's not easy. What am I — a basketball?! Seriously… people don't realise that your experience changes you in a profound way. You never look at things in the same way again. This existential shakeup can bring a different side of you to light, allow you to throw yourself into something new, or even something you've been putting off for years.

As a positive side effect, I found that doing things that go beyond myself had a tremendous effect on my mental health and net overall happiness. This is the one and only time in my life when a side effect was a good thing!

Whether it's my Simplify Cancer podcast where interview awesome people like Justin to share inspiration and advice around cancer, volunteering to raise money for clinical trials, or spreading the word out about my new book that helps men overcome the main challenges that come with cancer (Editor's Note: Check out ABSOT's review here), I find that worry, stress and uncertainty

take a backseat. They don’t exactly disappear, but they fade into the background, to the point when they are no longer running my life.

When you contribute to something bigger than myself, you channel your time, your thoughts and energy away from worry, you close the door on uncertainty.

You’re not alone, my friend! You didn’t ask for cancer, you didn’t ask for worry and craziness to take over, but you can do this. You can get through it and have the best life that you want; the life that you truly deserve beyond cancer!

Be sure to connect with Joe (@simplifyguy) by visiting him at simplifycancer.com. Join Joe’s free 7 Day Challenge to Take Your Life Back After Cancer. More on Joe’s book Simplify Cancer: Man’s Guide to Navigating the Everyday Reality of Cancer at simplifycancer.com/getbook. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

Know someone (or even yourself!) who is supporting TC awareness and would be willing to share their story? Drop their name, contact, and why they should be featured into this Google Form and I’ll reach out to them and/or you!

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