Letting More People In

I had told close friends and family that testicular cancer was suspected. Now that it was confirmed, it was time to tell more people.

January 19, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

Now that I had an official diagnosis, I decided to begin telling more people, beyond just my close family and friends. I didn't want to get pity, but I had already begun toying with the idea of turning this negative into a positive by beginning an awareness campaign, which eventually took form as ABSOT.

I told most people via text message. Overall, I wasn't ready to verbally discuss this whole endeavor with most people. I wanted to stay strong for others, as to not worry them, and a text allowed me to keep it fairly emotionless on my end. I kept messages straightforward and hopeful. I have cancer, and it is treatable. At this point, I didn't know the extent of the staging or spreading (but I'd find out in just a few days time), so it was easy to keep it positive.

To be honest, at times updating multiple people after each appointment got to be overwhelming.

Mal was updating family with phone calls, but my friends were my responsibility. I finally established a system where I would write a text, copy it into Google Keep and then have it on hand to paste when people asked. I also designated point people from each aforementioned group to update others, but inevitably people would still text me to ask. I always was more than happy to respond, but juggling twenty people at once was a lot. Still, I owed it to people to discuss what was going on in order to help raise awareness. A Facebook or Remind group might have simplified this process, but it also would be yet another thing to manage. I didn't have answers yet for how to best balance talking about my diagnosis while still maintaining my sanity.

Despite all of this, throughout the entire ordeal, I refused to get down about having cancer, and often made light of the situation or joked around about it. To this end, sometimes I would tell a few select people in more joking ways. Obviously, not everyone can handle hearing it like that, so I usually didn't use this tactic. However, I knew one of my online friends could take it. I messaged him and said, "Let's play a game called 'Who has testicular cancer?'" and sent him a gif of Barney Stinson raising his hand. Was that the most reverent way to tell someone? No. Did it help me cope? Yes. Was my friend shocked, yet amused? Absolutely.

Often, people don't know what to say when I tell them I had testicular cancer.

Realistically, I don't expect any particular response. Cancer sucks, simple as that. Saying things like "You will beat this," "I'm praying for you," and "You're in my thoughts" are sort of expected

things to hear. I don't dislike any of those, but I think there needs to be some way people are sort of taught what cancer patients want to hear. "What can I do to help you?" is something strong. Even if I don't have something in mind right now, I know I can ask you later. The major caveat is that if you say that, I will expect follow through when I ask. Words can be powerful to a cancer patient; use them meaningfully and wisely.

These are also my own personal views on what I want to hear. I am 25 and will almost definitely pull through this. This is in contrast to the 68-year-old woman diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer who is given two months to live. I never went through the supposed five stages of grief. I was told I had cancer, and accepted that. I wanted to know what was ahead so that I could look forward to to putting this behind me.

Sure, I was angry and sad at times, but on the whole my attitude was, "This sucks, but whining won't do anything. I don't want pity, I want tangible support. I want answers and I want this to be over." Each person is different in their level of acceptance of cancer, so it's important to keep that in mind when talking to any cancer patient. This is just my way.

Click here to read the next part of my story, where I learn I need chemotherapy.

On Thursdays, I am chronicling my journey from discovery to the beginning of chemotherapy. To read through my story up until this point, please click here.

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