How to Make No Shave November Meaningful

November 7, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

While October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, November is focused on men's health awareness—specifically testicular, prostate, and colon cancers. Two organizations share the credit in starting this endeavor: the No Shave November foundation, which encourages no facial hair shaving at all, and the Movember Foundation, which advocates for shaving all but your 'stash. Both organizations have been around for over a decade and have raised millions of dollars to support research and awareness projects for these cancers.

However, if you ask the average guy what No Shave November entails, they'll probably say something to the effect of, "I don't have to shave for a month, brah!" Perhaps they'll reference something about a playoff beard, which is a concept that is totally foreign to me, as I don't understand the sportsing. Either way, neither has anything to do with men's health awareness.

I'm not talking down from my mighty throne—I was that guy just three short years ago. At the time, I worked with three men (about two more than you'll usually find at the average elementary school). We all decided to grow out our beards for the month. Somehow, it was turned into a monetary competition involving the students and staff. Whoever raised the most money had to dye their beard blue and white.

Here's what I remember—somehow it ended in a three-way tie. We all had to dye our beards, which made teaching very difficult. Each day, we sent out an all staff email with a daily fact about beards and their significance through history.

What don't I recall? Any mention of testicular, colon, or prostate cancer at all. I don't even know specifically what the money went to, but I think it was the American Cancer Society.

We spent all that time hyping it up to the kids and researching beard facts but never talked about testicles or anything about men's health. Granted, I still don't discuss testicles with my fourth graders, but you can bet your ass (that's a prostate cancer pun) I talk about it with my co-workers. Imagine if we had used those all staff emails for good instead of random bits of knowledge.

That brings me to my point. This is the first November since ABSOT has been in full effect. One of my major goals is to get men talking about testicles and other male-specific issues. Whether you call it No Shave November, Movember, Novembeard, or anything else, my challenge to you is to

do better than 2014 Justin.

How can you do that?

In person...
Make the conversation about the mission—not the beard. Feel free to steal this sample conversation:

“My, Justin, your beard is getting mighty long and unkempt. Why don’t you shave?”

“Well, Jake, I made a commitment to avoid shaving for the whole month of November.”

“But why! You look like a mess!”

“That’s true, but I’m not shaving for a reason. November is a month to raise awareness about men’s health, specifically testicular, prostate, and colon cancer. Growing out my facial hair serves as a visual conversation starter. When’s the last time you treated your health seriously? Have you done a testicular self-check lately?”

“My goodness, you have totally changed my outlook on life. I’ll join you in this unkempt growing and spread the word—right after I jump in the shower to do a testicular self-exam!”

That might be a little sugar-coated, but a simple conversation is all it takes. I really like the Movember Foundation's ALEC (Ask, Listen, Encourage action, Check in) approach to discussing health with other guys. These four simple steps can make all the difference, especially the last one. Following up on these conversations is critical. Don't make it a once and done talk.

While it takes many months to grow a full Duck Dynasty-level beard, you'll have enough of an unruly mess by Thanksgiving dinner (or for you international readers, the fourth Thursday in November). Your facial hair can spark the conversation. Nothing brings a family together over the table or friends at a bar like discussions about feeling your balls and prostate exams.

On social media…

If you don't Gram/Tweet/Snap something, did it even happen? I get it—you're dedicated to growing out this beard, and you need the evidence to prove it. In 2014, I did the same thing. I posted the weekly pictures (to the right) to show my progress. What's missing from my captions? Actionable steps on how to do a self-exam, suggested ages to schedule colonoscopies, or risk factors for men's cancers.

Take it a step further—include links to resources about the preceding information. To save you the trouble, here are some great sites:

- For testicular cancer: Testicular Cancer Awareness Foundation Statistics page or Testicular Cancer Society TC 101 or Testicular Cancer Foundation FAQ page
- For prostate cancer: Prostate Cancer Foundation "Early Detection and Screening" or American Cancer Society "Early Prevention of Prostate Cancer"
- For colon cancer: Colon Cancer Alliance "Who Should Get Screened?" or Fight Colorectal Cancer "Prevent"

Sharing links comes with a caveat. Be sure to post links that actually help the cause. In prepping for this post, I searched for the origins of No Shave November. I found this post, "7 Things No One Tells You About No Shave November." Although the article started promisingly, it quickly devolved into seven random beard "facts" and then took a hard right into an advertisement for razors. Somehow, that link is the sixth hit on Google, which is a huge disappointment. The links I provided above are real, helpful resources. I'd also be more than happy for you to link to ABSOT—this post about shooting down excuses is a great one to use.

Whether you share a how-to, risk factors, or a link for more information, make your captions count by making them meaningful. The average person spends almost two hours every day on social media, and most of that content is cat videos and dank memes. Your purposeful post might just be the share that saves a life.

The "bottom" line…

If you’re growing facial hair in November and choosing to not back it up with real information and spreading awareness, that’s fine. You’re well within your rights to grow a beard and/or mustache, and you can do it all year round!

But if growing your beard is all you’re doing, please don’t act you’re doing it for a bigger cause. It takes balls to not shave for an entire month (especially if you grow in patchy), but it takes even bigger ones to talk about the true reason for the season. I wasn’t sure if I should write this post or not, but I saw some breast cancer survivors/patients who I really respect do the same about the pink ribbon business in October. I felt if they could sack up and write the post, so could I.

Donating to different foundations is awesome but I see just as great of a need to open up the lines of communication and understand the why of what we do. Growing a beard is a privilege as a healthy man, but discussing health (especially issues specific to our health, like these cancers) is a must.

Now excuse me as I get off my soapbox to begin charging my razor for December. I may have started the no shaving festivities slightly early…as in…September.

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