Man Up to Cancer: A Place for Connection and Healing

Trevor Maxwell shares why he formed Man Up to Cancer in the midst of his cancer battle.

August 28, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

Despite the vast amounts of knowledge available via the worldwide web, there still remains a shortage of information for men facing cancer. While ABSOT was originally formed out of my desire to create a resource for the newly diagnosed testicular cancer patient, there is always more work to be done. A few months ago, Trevor Maxwell formed a company called Man Up to Cancer. I asked him to write a post here sharing a little bit more about its mission.

Justin Birckbichler is a role model. (Editor's Note: This is a great introductory line. More guest posts should start like this.)

He has taken an enormous challenge (the life-threatening diagnosis of testicular cancer) and turned that experience into an educational mission that is literally saving lives, through his advocacy with A Ballsy Sense of Tumor.

Courtesy of Justin Birckbichler

I want to be a role model, as well. I’m fortunate that men like Justin can help guide my way.

Recently I founded a purpose-driven company called Man Up to Cancer, with the goal of inspiring men to avoid isolation throughout our cancer journeys.

Early in my own journey facing stage IV colon cancer, the idea of helping others seemed absurd. I was physically and emotionally broken. Before my diagnosis in March of 2018, I had been a strong and confident husband, father, and independent business owner. I was 41 years old and never imagined cancer would come knocking on the door.

Then, in what seemed like an instant, I was headed for colon surgery, then chemotherapy, then my first liver surgery. The physical challenges hit me hard. But not nearly as hard as the mental health challenges.

For much of 2018 and into 2019, as I tried to adjust to my new life as a cancer patient, crippling anxiety and depression sank their teeth into me.

I felt myself withdrawing into my own dark thoughts, suddenly distant from my wife and our two young daughters. Days passed, with me weeping and grieving, without hope, and without the fighting spirit I felt I was supposed to have. I grappled with deep shame. Not only had I gotten cancer, but I felt like I was failing at “dealing with it.”

At the lowest point, my family did not abandon me. Instead, they loved me through it.

Courtesy of Justin Birckbichler

When I had no strength or courage, they delivered those qualities two-fold. I was able to make a

promise to them. I said: “No matter if I live one more year or 40 more, I’m going to do everything in my power to regain my mental health, and to live with joy and purpose.”

The process started with admitting I needed help. I went to group counseling, one-on-one counseling, and other programs at the Dempsey Center, a non-profit organization in my home state of Maine, founded by Patrick Dempsey. (Editor’s Note: Check out my interview with Patrick about the Center here—super great guy and amazing work they’re doing.)

I connected with people online. Through the Colon Club, and then COLONTOWN, I met people going through the same diagnosis and treatments. I walked or biked every day. I accepted the love of the people around me.

Gradually, my mental health improved, my relationships were restored, and I began to find my voice as a patient advocate.

Man Up to Cancer was born out of this truth: Accepting help and avoiding isolation are actions of strength, not weakness.

Too many men feel they have to take on every challenge on their own. We are taught to be tougher and to not burden others. This approach might work in some scenarios, but not for cancer. When men isolate after a cancer diagnosis, they are at high risk for mental health problems, broken relationships, and poor medical outcomes.

Through our website and social media channels, Man Up to Cancer provides content—blogs, videos, and a podcast launching this summer—built to show men facing cancer that we are better off as a pack, rather than as lone wolves.

We also have a private Facebook group called The Howling Place, which is a place for male patients, survivors, and caregivers to unwind, make friends, and share stories. Currently, we have more than 10 cancer types represented in the group. (Editor’s Note: Including testicular cancer—that’s right, this Uniballer is a member!)

I know there are thousands of men out there who feel just like I did a few years back.

Anxious, depressed, overwhelmed, isolated by cancer. If this describes you, and you’re ready for change, there’s a whole wolfpack waiting for you.

Trevor Maxwell

Founder, Man Up to Cancer

trevor@manuptocancer.com

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