Running After Cancer.

I'll never forget that first run after my double mastectomy. That was one of the most beautiful days I've ever known.

April 2, 2018 By Jen Hodson

Every morning when I wake up, I stare the ceiling and I mourn my pre-cancer resilience. I remember how easy it was to turn off my alarm, jump out of bed and hop to whatever workout I had planned. Or more importantly, whatever run I had planned. These days, however, waking up is hard to do.

Chemo has left me battling insane and unpredictable fatigue. It has left me achy and creaky from all the medications, some of which I will be on for the next 5-10 years. I raise my arms over my head to stretch and hear the faint popping of my shoulders and elbows. I feel older than my 30 years. And that's just my body. My mind is foggy, it takes me awhile to gather myself and remember what is it I've woken up to do. Live. Sleep has been eluding me as of late, I toss and turn and grind my teeth and I suffer from anxiety-induced nightmares, or nightmares that induce anxiety. I can't really remember anymore. Occasionally I'll take a cheeky prescription at dinner to help me sleep through the night fully, but I hate doing that because it makes the grogginess all that much worse.

And I need to run. I need it in the most serious sense. Not because I've signed up for a marathon, not because I need to hit the 150 minutes of exercise per week my oncologist recommends… but because it keeps me sane. Although it takes a huge amount of effort to get me there, once my feet hit the treadmill or the pavement, I'm back to my old self. I'm moving. I'm free.

I'm not particularly fast, I've never really been that. But I am persistent. Routine helps guide my mind back to clarity, running helps my body shed its achy casing and push itself once again. I'm like Forrest Gump breaking free from his braces, I'm running to nowhere in particular, but the cancer truck is chasing me, and I have to go.

I take bone health supplements to offset the joint pain, I've added turmeric to combat inflammation. I stretch like I'm supposed to. I rest like I'm supposed to. I'm no longer able to run without abandon, I have to follow the rules. I have to check in with myself and every single cog of the machine. Are my breaths even? Do my lungs feel ok? Is my cording made worse or better by this exertion? Are my feet hitting a sure path (injury would be far harder to come back from)?

Runners high used to be something I seriously looked forward to. Now I welcome it like a stranger to my door: I check the peephole and wonder if it's ok to let in. Are my endorphins rushing in or

am I having a giant panic attack and my whole body is falling apart? It’s hard to trust anything these days. But I keep plodding.

I keep plodding because running awakens the soul. I am slower, more cautious than I used to be. I had to start over with a mix of walking and running as my body saw fit. Six months ago I could barely run a 5k. Now I’m up to 5 miles without stopping and hoping to go farther. Patience, dedication and caution help me through it. When I’m consistently running I see a huge change in my mental health, in my sleep patterns (snoozing without issue!) and in my cording (which resolves itself with regular exercise). Maybe I’m not quite ready to get my miles done in the morning, but I find time at lunch, or in the evening, and whenever I can on the weekends, to meet my goals. I have a wonderful coach who inspires me and pushes me to whatever limits I can handle.

I wasn’t able to start running until after my double mastectomy. I know plenty of people who ran through chemo (BADASSES) but that wasn’t me. I had to wait. And that moment came about a month after my surgery. I’ll never forget that first run, the wind moving the tiniest of peach fuzz on my mostly bald head. The stares from others as I ran by. The moment I finished and cried with joy. That was one of the most beautiful days I’ve ever known. My reconstruction and revision surgeries knocked me out for about 2 weeks each, so I hovered around a 5k distance purposefully. But I’m done with surgeries for now, and I’m ready to go the distance.

I never want to struggle up the stairs like I did during chemo. But that choice isn’t with me. And while I’m able to feel the breeze in my hair and ground move beneath me, I will run.

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