Steve Pake — An Award-Winning Cancer Blogger

Steve Pake shares his story to encourage other men in their testicular cancer fight — before, during, and after.

February 18, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

This month, I'm nine years out from my testicular cancer fight. Back when I was 33, I had some pain in Righty for a few months, but I just assumed that one of my toddlers had run into me. Yet the pain kept getting worse and worse. A few more superficial checks, including by my wife, who is a doctor, didn't find anything.

Finally, in the middle of the night before Valentine's Day (of all the days), the pain was so bad that I couldn't even sleep anymore. It was then that I finally copped a total and complete "What the hell is going on here" feel, and then I found it — a solid mass in the upper rear of my right testicle, exactly where it would have been missed.

I Didn't Open Up Right Away, Though

However, I wasn't compelled to start sharing this beginning and my full story publicly until three years after my diagnosis, and long after treatments and surgeries had ended. I remember being in my oncologist's office for a follow-up visit the year after my cancer fight, and was reading an article in an oncology magazine about how a lot of cancer survivors can experience depression and other mental health issues. I thought of how fortunate I was to be doing so well and that I hadn't experienced any of that, but the truth was I still hadn't even realized what had hit me yet.

I think that especially when you're a father, and when you have two young children at home whom you had only just brought into this world, that it adds another dimension to the cancer fight and to survivorship and what's at stake.

Fighting for More Than Yourself

You're not just fighting for yourself and your own future, but for your family's and your children's future as well. Going into cancer treatments, I cast all of my fears and emotions aside without realizing that's what I was doing, and became a warrior hell bent on eradicating every last cancer cell in my body no matter what it took, because my family and my children needed me.

After the shock of my diagnosis wore off, I hardly blinked through four rounds of chemotherapy

and the RPLND surgery, and always thought it was strange that I wasn't the least bit afraid of that surgery at all. I was actually terrified inside, but just didn't realize it until long after everything was over.

My Long and Slow Slide to Rock Bottom

My first year after cancer, I was still actually in a warrior mindset, not fighting against cancer, but rather with a body that was battered and heavily listing from multiple secondary health issues as a result of treatments. I also had to endure terrible neuropathy pain and chronic fatigue that had developed from the chemotherapy, and just having enough energy to make it through a day. It wasn't easy, but all things considered I thought I was doing well and just happy to be alive, until I came off the rails.

Around two years after my testicular cancer diagnosis was when friends I had made in the cancer community started to leave this world. I watched in complete horror as several friends passed, and then seeing their families torn apart with grief.

I had a terrible recurrence scare myself right as this was happening, and thought for sure that my cancer had returned and that I was next.

The Proverbial Dam Within Me Bursts

I had unknowingly been holding so much inside of me and it started pouring out. I was suddenly terrified of the brutal chemotherapy that I had already been through and of having to go through that again, and was terrified of the RPLND surgery that I'd already had 18 months prior and of having to go through that again as well. I was terrified of my future and of not having one, of seeing my family ripped apart by cancer as it was doing to my friends, and I just lost control and completely came off the tracks like I never had before in my life.

Every day in January of 2013, nearly two full years after my cancer diagnosis, I was in tears for hours and just overwhelmed with every bit of pain, fear, and grief that had been locked inside of me for so long and that I had never processed. I couldn't sleep and had terrible nightmares often. PTSD was ravaging my mind, and every dark moment from my treatments and surgeries replayed inside of my head like the trailer for some horror flick that I didn't know how to stop watching.

What I was feeling inside was so bad that I became suicidal as a means to an end, but my wife saved me. She got inside of my head to fight along with me in the way that only a soulmate could, and beat away these mental demons that had been ravaging me. It was from this point in the first months of 2013, two years after my cancer diagnosis, that I began my long crawl back up from absolute rock bottom as a young adult cancer survivor.

The Mission of My Writing

Most people in the testicular cancer community came to know me from all of the blogs and longer-form essays that I've written about the challenges of life after testicular cancer and as a young

adult cancer survivor. There were almost no young adult male cancer bloggers out there I could find who were open about any of the mental health issues I had faced, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and yes, even suicidal thoughts, and so I became one of the first to write about these topics.

My writing started out in those dark days of early 2013 as private journaling, just trying to find my way again. A cancer mentor had been writing for a cancer association, so I figured I would give it a try as a form of therapy, and it just stuck and the words kept on flowing.

By 2014, I was finally able to start approaching cancer survivorship from a position of strength, and published my first public cancer essay on Facebook to a viral response in April of 2014, after being encouraged by a friend to do so.

My Commitment to Writing Expands

Over the next few years I would publish dozens of blogs about testicular cancer and young adult cancer survivorship as I took people in the community along with me on my healing journey and advocacy mission.

Per the encouragement of many friends who told me my writing applied to far more than just the small testicular cancer corner of the Internet and social media, I expanded my reach to even larger organizations such as the huge community of IHadCancer.com and others, and also established my own website at StevePake.com as a repository for all of my writing, which was awarded as IHadCancer's Top Cancer Blog of 2016.

I can't even begin to tell you what it feels like to have an article really hit home, and see it reach over a thousand shares on social media with literally hundreds if not thousands of comments about how much something I had written helped others. Across all of the platforms my writing has been published on, I've managed to reach hundreds of thousands if not millions of people across the world. My writing has also saved lives, as it has helped to pull people out of the same suicidal downward spirals of despair that I had found myself in. That's a very powerful life experience to have, and one that I'll be forever proud of.

About Mental Health and What You Can Do

The best thing you can do, especially a male cancer survivor, is to just be open about what you feel, and to never be ashamed of anything. Just because we're men and have different anatomy than women doesn't mean that we don't have the same human feelings. As someone that's written to an audience of hundreds of thousands, believe me when I say that gender, race, class, caste, or any other so-called differences we can think up all matters not. We all feel the same "human" things after cancer, and have the same fears and worries. We're far more alike as human beings than most could possibly imagine, once you strip all of these social constructs away and just look at the core of our humanity. We're all so much the same inside.

Men and Cancer

What men feel after cancer is no different from anybody else, but just don't know how to handle them, or are ashamed of what they feel. Everybody else holds all of their pain inside as well, and so we feel alone as a result and like we're the only ones suffering, when that couldn't be further from the truth.

Men are just socially conditioned to hold it all inside, to "man up" and "be strong" and to never show any fear or pain, and so it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that the male suicide rate is 4 times that of women. As a result, men going through especially tough times in their lives, whether cancer or not, are far more prone to suicide. I would know, I've talked to more than a few men over the years that have contemplated, but never any women who have been suicidal when I have more female readers! Don't let yourselves get to this point. Just be open about what you feel, and never be ashamed. We're all human, after all.

A Decade of Cancer Survivorship Experience in One Section

After nearly a full decade as a testicular cancer survivor, life has largely moved on for me, and has also made a lot of other big asks and demands of my family and I. Testicular cancer is just a tiny speck in the rear view mirror for me at this point, but there's much I've yet to write about it. I'll share with you here my top tips after nearly a decade of cancer survivorship.

Allow yourself to grieve. Yes, we need to grieve as young adult cancer survivors, the loss of our lives as we once knew them, and of all the expectations that we might have had for ourselves. Acknowledge and respect what you feel inside, without apology or beating yourself up for it, as processing and releasing all of the pain we can experience after having cancer in our lives is what helps us to move on from it.

Pay It Forward

Next, we're all going to have a ton of nervous and anxious energy as cancer survivors. Do something productive with that energy. Run a marathon for the first time in your life. Write your hearts out and share it with the world. Volunteer at a non-profit organization and make a difference for others, or start a new cancer mission or non-profit organization yourself. Play an active role in support groups. Be a mentor. Create a first of its kind event for the community and invite the entire planet. There's nothing worse than being consumed by anxiety while you're stuck in Park. Keep those wheels moving and get after things.

As men, it's important to build something meaningful and to have a legacy to leave behind, when we feel like we might already be at the end. Live your best life, go amazing places, do amazing things, meet amazing people, and have a great time. Life after cancer is no time to be sitting still and letting life pass you by because you're worried about what might not ever happen.

Never Stop Believing in Yourself

No matter how much pain you're in, and no matter how far you fall, never stop believing that you'll

crawl your way back up and emerge better and stronger than ever. This is what drives us to keep getting back up, to try new things, and to open doors we might not have otherwise, that will ultimately allow us to thrive after cancer rather than to just survive it. You have to believe in yourself and should never stop, but we're only human, and there's going to be times when we're going to fall short of that. None of us can do all of this alone, and that's why it's so important to find the right support and the right people who will continue to fight for you, believe in you, and stand by your side in times of weakness. No one fights alone. Now get after it!

You can connect with Steve via his website!

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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