Three Self-Care Tips From a Testicular Cancer Survivor

Some ways I've grabbed my life by the ball(s) and made a commitment to making my post-cancer life the best it can possibly be

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As a testicular cancer survivor, self-care is very important to me. While I spend a lot of my time working on ABSOT and other cancer awareness and advocacy projects, I'm also careful to make sure I'm not investing every single moment of my day into this work. I've talked about how I have focused on healing my mind, but it's been just as important to take care of my body.

Exercise is what I do solely for me — it's my form of self-care. I was honestly ashamed of my bloated and flabby body, lack of endurance, and pitiful amount of strength post-chemo. I finally decided to do something about it a year ago, in August 2017. Since then, I've shed over forty pounds, dropped nearly ten percent of my body fat, increased my running stamina, and nearly doubled my maximum lifting stats.

These three tips are how I've grabbed my life by the ball(s) and made a commitment to making my post-cancer life the best it can possibly be. While exercise is what I've chosen as my form of self-care, it may not be yours — and that's totally fine. The following tips can all be easily adapted to whatever form of self-care you choose. Find what works for YOU.

Apply old cancer habits to new endeavors in self-care

While I was going through chemotherapy, I kept a journal of how I felt at certain hours of the day, medications I took, my temperature, and the amount of testicles I currently possessed (spoiler — it was always one).

Now, I use that meticulous record keeping habit for a different purpose — tracking my weight lifting routines. Every single workout is logged, including how many pounds I picked up and subsequently put down, how I was feeling that day, and how many sets I did.

Another major component of chemo was strict scheduling. I had a timetable of when I had to be at chemo and what treatments I would be receiving. These days, keeping a schedule is just as important — straight to the gym from work. I may not necessarily write it down always, but I have a plan for which muscle group and run I do on each day.

Repurpose cancer objects into self-care motivational tools

Not to humblebrag or anything, but I get a lot of compliments on my gym bag. If you're reading this without looking at the pictures (which is an impressive feat in and of itself), it's a backpack with various Marvel characters on it, represented in a stylized cartoon format. It may or may not have been designed for fourteen year old boys, which are half my age, but I have half the amount of testicles as they do, so I think it all balances out.

However, this bag used to be what I used to carry my personal effects to and from chemo. By bringing the same bag with me to the gym, it's a constant reminder of where I was and my motivation to take care of myself to get to where I want to be.

My iPad traveled with me to chemo, and it still has a place in my bag today. The purposes I use it for are even similar. My iPad, which is a vintage model (to be generous) is basically a way to watch digital movies and TV. However, while it was used during chemo to Netflix and chill (I'm 98% sure I'm using that term correctly), it's now used to Vudu and run (not as catchy, admittedly). Sometimes, I just plain don't feel like running, but by seeing that iPad poking out from my former chemo bag, I remember what it was like to not even have energy to do a flight of stairs.

Set self-care goals, but don't beat yourself up if you don't meet them

Both minor and major goal setting was a huge component how I faced cancer. Some of my minor and more short-term goals included eating lunch, walking around upstairs, and not throwing up for the next hour (admittedly, I failed pretty epically on that last one). Goal setting gave me something to work towards and focus on, and I've applied that to my self-care routine today. If I did 2.2 miles in a 20 minute interval run this week, I'll aim for 2.3 the next. I did 8 pull ups on that last set; I'll shoot for 9 the next time. Small goals help keep me motivated and moving along.

My main cancer goal (as is the goal of most cancer patients) was to beat the disease. Since I am writing this, I've clearly achieved that goal and I am thankful every day for that. However, I did not achieve my primary goal I set for myself when I began working out in August 2017. I had a plan — I would have a max bench press of 225 pounds, something I had never been able to do this when I was an avid lifter in college. While this was a completely arbitrary goal, it felt like a good amount of weight to aspire to (and two plates on each end seems really cool, though two of one thing seems to be excessive in my opinion).

It's now August 2018, and my max bench press hovers around 200. For those of you who may struggle with math, this is approximately 25 pounds less than I planned on attaining. To be frank (and this is not to be confused with 'to be Frank,' my neighbor who I aspire to be one day and who is a fellow cancer survivor), I was very disappointed in myself at first. I pride myself on reaching goals, and I failed.

But then I flipped back to my lifting journal and saw where I started in August — barely 100 pounds. I wasn't kidding in the introduction when I said I had no strength. By lifting 200 pounds, I've nearly doubled my bench in a year. This is a huge proportional increase, and this isn't even to mention the gains in other areas of lifting or the great strides in running progress — pun fully

intended.

A final note on self-care

Self-care is important, and we need to take time for ourselves. You don't owe anyone any explanation of your preferred method, and it's not always necessary make a big deal over how or what you're doing to take care of yourself. While I am exercising, I often think about what I've been through and what kind of person I want to be. It's an intense moment — both physically and in the reflection aspects.

Physical fitness is a great idea, especially in the case of cancer survivors, since the American Cancer Society recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate activity per week to lower risk of cancer.

No matter what you choose as your form of self-care, make it a priority. We can't give our 100% to others if we're not taking care of ourselves first. While this may seem selfish, as a cancer survivor, I realize I've been given a second chance at life — and I intend on making the most of it.

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