SURVIVING CANCER

11 LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LIFETIME EXPERIENCE

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My cancer came back in October 2016. The first occurrence happened in May 2015, and it was like a walk in the park. The day I was diagnosed on a Wednesday, operated on Saturday and back at work the following Wednesday with active surveillance as follow-up. In short, a little blip in a very healthy life.

The second time was a more profound life-changing experience. The treatment was brutal with 26 days of chemotherapy over 68 days from Oct 24-Dec 31, 2016. It felt like I was living in a fiend, chemotherapy-infused cocoon. My family and I thought that the page would turn on Jan 2, 2017. It was not so simple as the results were not ideal.

After a couple of months of uncertainty and stress, the latest results from my tests have cleared me, putting me on active surveillance and allowing me to come back to the land of the living. It feels fantastic!

However, so many things have changed. I am a cancer survivor as I now come under active surveillance for the foreseeable future with a chance of recurrence.

I have left my last position as chief human resources officer of Asean’s fastest growing premium and luxury retailer. With my youngest daughter Chiara graduating from high school in June, my wife Elisabeth and I are completely mobile to envision the future.

Roots, family, friends and places have become ever more present. I finally know that I need to find new opportunities with meaning around my passion, notably people development, executive education and teaching in strongly-branded organisations.

From the start of my treatment to when I got the green light to live normally again, I wrote a journal of events and feelings that I shared with family and friends. I can only tell you with hindsight that it was an essential way for me to cope and better understand what was happening to me.

By sharing the journal, it forced me not only to delve on the negativity of the experience, but also to share positive moments and important life lessons I’ve learnt along the way.

I cannot thank enough those who read through the journal and supported me through this life-changing ordeal.

I would now like to share my 11 life lessons that I learnt from battling this disease. It is my hope that they may be useful to others who may, unfortunately, have to embark on a similar journey.

1 FIND YOUR OWN COPING MECHANISMS
Cancer treatment is a war that takes place within your mind and body where the enemy and the adversary are the same – chemotherapy. To cope, you need to find your own means to keep going. While it is important to listen to others, especially other cancer survivors, doctors and nurses who know the battle is still yours to fight.

In my case, I wanted to know about my cancer just enough to make thoughtful decisions.

I was not looking for the world’s best cancer expert but a fact that became a routine that was close to home and my family. Reading became an obsession, as did watching the Montreal Canadiens hockey games.

2 FIND YOUR OWN MINDSET
I was often pushed to be the perpetual optimist, to look at how others had suffered more than me. It never actually worked for me.

Dwelling in negativity and slipping into depression are certainly not the desired mindset either. Fortunately, I was able to deal with it by having an optimistically realistic approach to my fate.

With cancer, I ended up many times on the wrong side of the statistics. So had I been too optimistic at every step, I believe that it would have left me shattered.

By being realistic, it allowed me to cope with the negatives and fight on. It taught me how to be more reflective when some piece of good news came my way. It’s always great to have won small battles, but don’t get too confident until the big war is won.

3 TRYING TIMES FOR EVERYBODY
Being diagnosed was a moment in life where everything just shifted, not only for me but also for those dearest to me, especially my wife and children.

I became totally dependent on them. It required important adjustments for all. After years of being at the peak of health, the sudden change to being at home or the hospital created a sense of helplessness. It was not only tough on me, but it demanded a lot of courage and resilience from Elisabeth and Chiara.

4 BUILD A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT
I don’t believe anyone can go through this ordeal alone, at least not healthily. So find that community in family, friends, doctors, nurses and acquaintances. Their physical and emotional support will make all the difference.

5 FIND A WAY TO SHARE WHAT IS HAPPENING
It is not enough to have people supporting you; you need an avenue to talk it out. It seems that this comes more easily for women than for men.

It is so often of these reasons that Samuel L. Jackson created an association called “One for the Boys” to get men with cancer to talk more openly about what they were going through.

In my case, the journal helped greatly.

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6 THE IMPORTANCE OF SECOND (OR SUBSEQUENT) OPINIONS
Gather advice from different people, preferably from different places. This is especially true when critical decisions need to be made.

I reassured me to know that all the doctors in Malaysia and Canada whom we had consulted shared the same diagnosis and treatment protocol.

6 MORE RECENTLY, IT POTENTIALLY SAVED ME FROM UNNECESSARY CYCLES OF CHEMOTHERAPY AND OPERATIONS.

This is thanks to a visit to my urologist who suggested that I meet a testicular cancer specialist at the National Cancer Centre of Singapore.

The specialist recommended, with the support of the world’s leading testicular cancer expert in Norway, to stop all further treatment if my scan was clear and a blood sample test was okay, which turned out to be the case.

7 LOVELY THINGS HAPPEN IN TRYING TIMES
Despite the ordeal, I am so thankful for many things. It brought our family closer together.

Back in September, as a young adult, Chiara was growing more distant and independent as is the case for most people her age.

But with the recurrence of my cancer, she realised the importance of family, and that brought us much closer before she furthered her studies.

I realised how unsupportive I was when Elisabeth had cancer 15 years ago. I finally apologised to her as it was something that had lingered in her heart for years.

We spent Christmas as it was intended to be spent — a special moment of love and care, instead of fighting and waiting only to open presents.

The experience also brought me closer to many friends, families and acquaintances. The messages of support were heart-warming and profoundly impactful to my wellbeing.

8 EXERCISE
You will lose weight and energy. In many cases, you will experience hair loss, although that quickly becomes secondary if you are a man.

In between chemotherapy sessions, work to stay healthy and exercise. It is essential to speed up your recovery, especially for your mental wellbeing.

Small steps will do and, as my doctor told me, your body will tell you fast enough when it cannot go on anymore.

I can say that by working at it, I was just about back to normal after two and a half months. And in three to four months, I should be fitter and healthier than ever.

9 BEWARE OF THE FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES
In some cases, with less brutal treatment and more understanding bosses, you may be able to manage your state of mind better.

But in other cases, you may have to stop working for months, facing you to leave your current employment.

You may also want to completely reassess your life and take a more fulfilling and healthier path.

You probably need 6–12 months of financial security to make it through. Thanks to Elisabeth, we were fortunate enough to have something sold, and that gave us some security.

One wonderful story of support in financially trying times was told by former vice president Joe Biden when he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from former president Barack Obama on Jan 12, 2017.

When Beau Biden, Joe’s eldest son, was diagnosed with a brain tumour, Joe was unable to continue working as attorney-general of Delaware and, as a result, no longer had enough money to support his family.

Joe was ready to sell his house outside Washington to help his son and told the president about it.

Given what Joe had been through in losing his first wife and young daughter to brain cancer, the president immediately offered to find ways to help.

He would never allow him to sell it and help his son. The president promised to pay for the surgery.

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Families and friends of others.

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To read the remaining story of Charles’ life-changing experience with the Big C, head on to bit.ly/3y2y2UY

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