

A HEROIC JOURNEY

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH CANCER

A cancer diagnosis is life changing. Whether it's someone you love or a personal diagnosis, it's a moment in time that no one forgets. And, unfortunately, this diagnosis has touched all of us in some way—a sad fact of this disease.

The ripple effects of cancer are far-reaching, a wave that crashes into lives in large and small ways. For the person receiving the diagnosis, it's terrifying. For their family, friends, and co-workers, it can be hard in a different kind of way.

Cancer-fighters are heroes. Major life challenges like a cancer diagnosis bring a cascade of emotions, including fear, courage, dread—and hope. The emotions are many and varied, but the support of family and friends is crucial to surviving this disease and benefitting from the lessons it can offer.

This isn't an article about cancer, about treating it or easing the symptoms. It's about the emotions that hit hard, along with the cancer, and the emotional tidal wave that is part of any serious illness. It's about what happens to a person, and to their loved ones, as they fight the fight of their life, how they are changed, the lessons they learn, and how they become heroes. It's about another courageous survivor, here at *alive*, Ryan Benn.

As publisher and CEO of Alive Publishing Group and Canada Wide Media, Ryan Benn has mastered the art of handling pressure. So, when faced with the news of cancer while on vacation in May 2022, Ryan did what he does best. He took action. But he had some decisions to make first. And he had to process how this diagnosis was about to change him forever.

Here, Ryan shares, in his own words, what this formidable illness has taught him, so that others may find hope and inspiration to accept the powerful lessons that a challenge with cancer can offer.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis day is like a plot twist in a movie; it divides your life into “before” and “after.” Emotions such as shock, disbelief, and fear washed over me like a flood, leaving me breathless. I wanted to shut down, to not feel. But I couldn't stay in that moment forever. I had to decide: let the fear control me or channel it into something positive. That wasn't toxic positivity; it was a life raft if I was willing to use it.

I had squamous cell carcinoma of the oropharynx. When I first found the lump in my neck, I thought it was a swollen lymph node resulting from a head cold. After two PET scans and another two biopsies and CT scans, the results were *still* inconclusive, so the mass was surgically removed. It was a tumultuous time. My world was turned upside down, and I was drowning in a sea of uncertainty.

A week later, I was informed it was positive for cancer, indicating it was a stage 2 metastasis and we needed to discuss treatment options for the primary cancer. The team of oncologists decided the best treatment plan was daily radiation for six weeks. I was scared—scared enough that I allowed myself to feel it. That was important.

Like most people facing cancer, I wondered, why me? I have had more than my fair share of medical fights, and I believe I'm a good person who gives more than they take, but none of that matters to cancer. My cancer wasn't a punishment; it simply *was*. The fight had come to me, and I intended to battle with grace, dignity, determination, and love. ➤



“The biggest aha moment for me was his powerful resilience and spirit. This was his fight and not once did he complain or blame. He saw this not as a setback, but as a stepping stone that would allow him to come out of this better and stronger.”



“Acknowledge those feelings and seek independent support early on. You can’t fix this, but consistently being there is enough, and silence is okay. Know that you can be there for your friend or loved one and make yourself a priority too.”



“He asked his friend group to lean in to support his wife, daughters, and their home environment by taking on jobs he was not physically able to do. If they were supporting his family, he could worry less and put his energy toward getting well.”



“I tried to support Ryan’s immediate family as much as I could. Cancer affects the whole family and community of those diagnosed. He has so many people who love and respect him. We all wanted to help them in this fight.”

THE TREATMENT

Before I started treatment, I thought about how I would want others to view my fight. Many times, I could have given up, but my love for my friends, family, and myself kept me going and reminded me of what was possible—reminded me it was okay to hope.

As planned, my treatment lasted six weeks. The two weeks post-treatment were the hardest. I’d lost 20 lbs and almost all sense of taste. What I could taste was horrible, and my mouth, throat, gums, and tongue were so badly burned that they bled constantly, and the pain was severe. Swallowing liquid took immense motivation, and I was told I would have some significant lifelong degradations to my quality of life.

Incredibly, my sense of taste returned to about 90 percent about six months following treatment. This was considered extremely unlikely, so I’m incredibly grateful. I realized these small wins are everything and I should hold on to them, to use them to motivate myself on the tough days.

THE WAY FORWARD

Staying strong for others wasn’t always easy. The biggest lesson I learned at this time was to self-motivate. The cancer fight is a solo fight. Everyone who loves me wanted to take on the fight too, but at best could only play a supporting role—and that’s okay, that’s the reality. I felt like I was the cause of so many other people’s fear, pain, and sadness, and I wanted to make that better.

Controlling my narrative was vital. At first, I was going to make this a very private battle, but my kids, friends, staff, customers, partners, and the broader community I impact needed to hear my perspective, not someone else’s interpretation of it.

I learned early on that I needed to stay honest with everyone, including my two girls. It’s hard on everyone, but honesty was the only way to meet this wave head-on. I needed their support, and they needed to know they could trust me.

THE EMPOWERMENT

Telling my family and friends was hard; in some cases, it brought us closer, and unfortunately in some cases, it drove us apart. I expanded my care team and educated myself. I read, researched, discussed, and made cancer knowledge my primary concern. Because of this, I felt empowered, and I discovered many tests, treatments, and mindset tools that would never have come to me otherwise, and I credit these for my strong recovery and positive outlook.

I knew it was up to me to keep my mind and body strong, so I kept exercising, flooding my body with good endorphins and oxygen for at least 30 minutes of high-intensity cardio every

day. Instead of feeling tired, sick, and in pain, it felt like I was fighting and beating the cancer when I was exercising. This was my way of giving cancer the proverbial middle finger.

I also learned to nourish my body and to carefully evaluate how I was feeling. Food is medicine and can be a game-changer, so I nourished my body with quality. Although it was sometimes hard, I never compromised. I made my food, chose organic, and took supplements while respecting the science and the effects of all my actions on radiation success.

I realized, too, that I had to stay busy with what fuels me. This is different for everyone. I went to work every single day because it was motivating. I slept when I needed to, and I cooked for my kids, even when my energy was low and the food made me nauseous.

THE SUPPORT

I learned quickly to accept help. A very special group of friends drove me to treatment every day, waited for me, then drove me home. It turned an excruciating daily chore into a special moment for us and gave my immediate family time to rest. Some very incredible people became even more incredible through their love for me.

I understand how hard it can be to support someone with cancer, but mowing the lawn, picking up leaves, and doing simple jobs around the house was a real help and made me feel like less of a burden.

When others asked how they could support me, I told them they could make plans for us for when I was feeling stronger, so I had something to look forward to. I love travel, food, and adventure, so these experiences have been incredible and will provide memories for life.

THE AFTERMATH

Surviving cancer treatment doesn't mean the challenge is over. Every health check, every cold, is a reminder of what was and what still could be. But moving forward with gratitude and a new perspective about what *really* matters is my new normal.

I realized that, when facing cancer, mindset is everything. So I stay positive; I hope to inspire others *and* myself. I put others first and am committed to helping others through their cancer journey. I focus on what helped me fight my cancer, and I use that focus for good. This is how I will pay it forward.

This experience has taught me to worry less. I wish I could say completely, but that would be a lie. But less worry? This was cancer's greatest gift to me. Worry is the worst part of cancer—it's the real cancer. The degree of worry I felt when I was told I could be dying, to the all-pervasive worry that took over while waiting for results, to living with worry in recovery about relapse—it can feel overwhelming. But I've learned to



LESSONS LEARNED

Still in active recovery, although difficult, I try to view this cancer as a gift for the lessons I've learned:

1. Educate yourself.
2. Expand your care team.
3. Motivate yourself.
4. Accept help.
5. Stay nourished.
6. Stay busy with what fuels you.
7. Exercise.
8. Make future plans—get excited.
9. Learn to worry less.
10. Stay honest—with yourself and others.

silence the noise, and I've learned that almost nothing else is worth worrying about.

Life will always remind us how fragile we are, the transient way of things. Like the sea, our world may be uncertain and tumultuous one moment, then calm and serene the next. Whatever the state of *your* waters, ride that wave, and know with certainty that you can do hard things, no matter the outcome. The lessons learned will never be wasted. Others will learn from your experience and, with a little determination, will use *your* fight to fuel their own. ➤

SUPPLEMENTS: IMPORTANT PLAYERS IN CONTINUED GOOD HEALTH

Supplements continue to play a very important role in Ryan’s recovery. Some are the same ones many of us take to ensure our own well-being. As always, be sure to discuss any new supplements with your health care team to ensure the right choices for you.



SUPPLEMENT	BENEFIT
glutamine	helps build protein in the body; supplementation may help in taste recovery and tissue rebuilding, as well as treating weakness and loss of muscle mass following cancer treatment
multivitamins	made from whole foods, offer overall insurance for general health
probiotics	help support a healthy intestinal microbiome; interact with and stimulate intestinal immune cells for general immune system support
omega-3	fatty acids play a critical role in maintaining healthy skin function and appearance and also help in repairing damaged skin
quercetin	has antioxidant and antiallergic properties; helps stimulate the immune system
turmeric’s	active ingredient curcumin has both antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits
green tea extract	may provide anticancer benefits; may help increase HDL (good) cholesterol and decrease LDL (bad) cholesterol and modulate blood pressure
zinc	helps maintain a healthy immune system; important in wound healing, it also aids in reducing oral mucositis
milk thistle	may help relieve side effects of radiation and recovery
AHCC	(active hexose correlated compound), a proprietary extract of shiitake mushrooms, has anti-inflammatory benefits; may have anticancer effects
saffron	contains cancer-protective properties and may help reduce side effects of chemotherapy treatment ¹