

GOING ON A BEAR HUNT

By Josh Martin



Five things cancer taught me
about **overcoming obstacles**

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INTRODUCTION

GUESS WE'LL HAVE TO GO THROUGH IT

As a kid, one of my favourite campfire sing-alongs was “Going on a Bear Hunt.” For the uninitiated out there, it’s a simple enough ditty where the leader sings one line and rest of the group repeats it. Here’s how it goes:

We’re going on a bear hunt. (Repeat)

We’re going to catch a big one. (Repeat)

I’m not scared. (Repeat)

Look at alllllll those stars. (Repeat)

At this point, someone picks an obstacle that your band of intrepid bear hunters must overcome—a tree, pit of vipers, mob of Twilight fans or other impediment barring the way forward. The song continues with finding a way to overcome the obstacle. For example:

A tree! (Repeat)

Can’t go over it. (Repeat)

Can’t go through it. (Repeat)

Can’t go under it. (Repeat)

Guess we’ll have to go around it. (Repeat)

The song continues indefinitely, as various obstacles are identified and overcome on the way to the bear’s cave. Ogres and quicksand you go around. Rocks and logs you go over. Low-hanging branches and troll-guarded bridges you go under.

But what happens when you’re confronted with a scorching desert, raging snowstorm or lethal minefield that stretches as far as the eye can see in every direction? Indeed, sometimes on your bear hunt, you crest a hill and come face to face with an obstacle that leaves you with only one option. Sometimes you just have to go *through* it.

Obstacles come in many shapes and sizes. Ironically, the biggest one I’ve ever faced was so tiny you needed a microscope to see it. But whether it’s a break-up, a challenging time at work or—in my case—a nasty bout of cancer, we all face obstacles.

This book is about those times and some advice to help get you through them.



MY STORY

Looking back, you'd wonder how I could miss so many of the early signs. But hindsight is 20/20. And when you're 27 years old, your biggest health concern tends to be something like dandruff, not leukemia. Cancer never entered my mind.

The symptoms were there though.

Creeping crisis

In 2007, I was working in Toronto as a project coordinator for an international development charity. I was by no means a health freak, but I took care of myself. I biked to and from work, going so far as to carry my bike up the nine flights of stairs to my apartment each evening. I was a vegetarian, didn't smoke and did my best to avoid fast food joints. I loved to hike and competed in eight-hour adventure races that involved trekking, canoeing and mountain biking through the wildernesses of Ontario.

When I think about it now, I probably should have noticed something was amiss at one of those races that summer. The event took place near Ottawa, and I had teamed up with two of my brothers, Dan and Damien, to form the "Mad Martins." During the mountain bike leg, I kept falling behind, completely winded.

Gasping for air as my brothers disappeared around a bend far ahead, I tried to pedal harder. It was one thing to be outpaced by Dan, who was a bit of a fitness nut. But Damien? Come on! The man never got exercise. Embarrassed, I climbed a small hill to find Dan and Damien once again waiting for me to catch up. *I'm really out of shape!* I thought to myself.

What I didn't realize at the time was that me dragging my butt had less to do with my workout regimen and more to do with the fact that my oxygen-carrying red blood cells were dangerously low.

After an abysmal showing at the race, I returned to civilization. The weather turned cold and I put my bike away for the season, promising myself I'd get in better shape over the winter.

Bleeding eyeballs

I quickly forgot about my poor athletic performance and got back in the grind of deadlines and overflowing inboxes. But it didn't take long for another sign of the microscopic mayhem raging inside me to show up: this time in the form of an annoying blurriness in my left eye. Too much time in front of the computer screen, I figured, shrugging it off.

By Christmas however, the blurriness was no better and I finally got around to booking an appointment with my optometrist. Maybe I needed eye drops or a new prescription. At her office, Dr. Tang shone a light into my just-dilated eyes to see if she could suss out the source of the problem. It didn't take her long. "The inside of your eyeballs are haemorrhaging," she said. *Well, that can't be good*, I thought.

Concerned it might be diabetes, Dr. Tang suggested I go see my family doctor to have some blood work done.

Annoyingness gave way to genuine concern.

584,000

"I need to see you," Dr. Merker said over the phone. "We need to talk about these blood results." My mouth went dry. He briefly explained that my white blood cell counts were through the roof and my reds ridiculously low. After agreeing to come by his office over lunch, I hung up the phone and stared blankly at my cubicle wall. Suddenly all those urgent deadlines and emails didn't seem so urgent.

Next stop: Google. I had no idea what a high white blood cell count might mean, but I knew it couldn't be good. I typed in "high white blood cell count symptoms" and quickly scanned the results. There were several possibilities, but one kept popping up, site after site: leukemia.

Moving from concerned to scared to death, I hopped a bus and made my way to Dr. Merker's office. *Please don't be cancer, please don't be cancer, please don't be cancer*. I spent the entire ride repeating this prayer in my head.

Dr. Merker met me in his office and handed me a printout of my blood results. It might as well have been written in Klingon. Although I'm now an expert at reading and interpreting blood work, at the time I had no idea what I was looking at. Dr. Merker walked me through it.

The average number of white blood cells in a healthy adult male is somewhere in the range of 4,500 and 10,000 per microlitre. Mine? 584,000. Crap. Though we'd need a bone marrow biopsy to confirm, there was little doubt in Dr. Merker's mind: I had leukemia. "You've got a journey ahead of you," he told me.

I didn't go back to work after my less-than-cheery visit with Dr. Merker. I didn't call or visit anybody. Instead, I caught a bus back home. I stared out the window, marvelling at how the world could keep spinning when mine had just come to a screeching halt.

I cried, shattered and unprepared for this kind of obstacle.

Relax, you've got cancer.

The anguished wail of a woman snapped me back to my surroundings. I was sitting in the cancer ward at the newly opened Brampton Civic Hospital, waiting my turn to have a bone marrow biopsy to confirm Dr. Merker's suspicions. The wail came from one of the offices adjoining the waiting room. It sounded like someone had told her she was going to die. Quite possible, given where we were.

I didn't want to be here. Though calm, cool and collected on the outside, I was a wreck. Besides my boss, who needed to know why I was missing so much work for the flurry of medical appointments that followed my visit with Dr. Merker, I still hadn't told anybody about the cancer. No friends. No family. The pin was pulled, but I wanted all the information I could get before I hurled this grenade at my loved ones.

A nurse called my name. I got up and followed her to one of the patient rooms. I was terrified of what lay ahead, but also relieved to have the wheels finally in motion. The suspense was nearly killing me as much as the cancer was.

Let me be clear: Bone marrow biopsies suck. The doctor uses an auger-like hand tool to dig into your pelvic bone and snap off tiny chunk of bone and marrow. Not pleasant. A while later, an oncologist came bustling into the room, my chart in hand. "Relax with a capital R," he said.

Relax. Riiiiiiiiiiight.

He went on to explain. Although there was no question I had leukemia, the good news was I had an extremely treatable form of the disease. Chronic myelogenous leukemia they called it—CML for short.

Unlike other forms of leukemia, CML can typically be treated with a relatively new wonder drug called Gleevec. Taken orally once or twice daily, Gleevec doesn't cure the cancer but keeps it in check, preventing the mutated chromosomes from mass-producing cancerous white blood cells.

It remained to be seen if the medication would work on me, but for the first time in a week, I let myself breathe.

The next few weeks went by in a blur. A week-long hospital stay in Brampton so they could monitor me as the meds lowered my white blood cell count. Emotional emails, phone calls and visits with friends and family. Getting my records and care transferred to Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. Returning to work.

The bear hunt had begun.



LESSON #1

LEAN ON YOUR TEAM

It takes more than luck to navigate life's tricky waters.

Heads I live. Tails I die.

On February 28th, just as I started to settle into the “new normal” of life on Gleevec, fate delivered another stinging blow.

“Rare as hell,” my primary oncologist Dr. Lipton said as he reviewed the results of my latest bone marrow biopsy. My leukemia had gotten real aggressive, real quick, entering unexpectedly into what’s called the Blast Crisis phase. And while most of the medical mumbo jumbo I’d been bombarded with flew right over my head, I figured anything with a name like “Blast Crisis” couldn’t be a good thing. By the look on his face, Dr. Lipton was as stunned as I was at the latest development. He told me that in twenty years he’d only ever seen something like this happen once before.

Mama always told me I was special.

Gleevec was no longer considered a viable long-term treatment option for me. Instead, I would need to blitzkrieg my body with months of powerful chemotherapy and radiation in an effort to pound the disease into remission. But even that wouldn’t keep the monster at bay. No, I’d need to rid myself of my defective bone marrow entirely and replace it through a risky stem cell transplant—assuming, of course, they could even find me a donor. My bear hunt suddenly got a lot more treacherous.

I worked up enough saliva in my mouth to croak out a question. “What are my odds?”

Dr. Lipton didn’t sugar-coat it. “Forty to 50 per cent.”

Hoo boy.

I returned home from my appointment with Dr. Lipton, shell-shocked. Forty to 50 per cent. A coin toss, really. With that in mind, I grabbed a quarter from the desk in my basement office. “Heads I live, tails I die” I said, flicking the coin into the air.

I caught the coin and held it under my sweaty palm on the back of my other hand. I held my breath and took a peek.

Heads. Phew.

Though thrilled to have Lady Luck on my side, I knew it would take more than a fortunate flip to get through this. There are times in life when going it alone isn't an option. This was one of those times. To survive this bear hunt, I was going to need one hell of a team.

And it wasn't just my doctors. I soon realized I required a whole army of supporters. My parents. My brothers and sisters. My friends. The nurses on Floor 15. My pharmacist. Nutritionists, social workers, chaplains, physical therapists, counsellors. Hell, even my dog Stockie would play a key role.

More than a coin flip

No one is an island. There is strength in numbers. Two heads are better than one. Whatever your preferred cliché, overcoming obstacles happens by having the right people by your side.

I would have to choke down a lot of big, nasty pills during my treatment. But the toughest pill to swallow was giving up my independence and asking for help. I hated putting my family and friends through this. Worse still, I hated the idea of being a burden. But as time went by and as the treatment took its toll, I would have to accept that I did in fact need help.

I also started to better understand that I wasn't being a burden—that my family and friends were desperate to help. When you're facing an obstacle, the feeling of helplessness can be crushing not just for you, but for your family and friends as well. Letting loved ones chip in, even if you might not think you need it, can be as much a gift to them as to you.

It took a while to be okay with it, but eventually I allowed myself to share my heavy load. Friends and family graciously offered to help out with household chores, rides to and from my appointments and other everyday necessities so I could focus on getting better.

No matter who you are, there will be times when your motivation flags, when everything that needs doing overwhelms you or when you can't see the way forward. At those times, you'll need to lean on the strengths and support of others.

Indeed, as I packed my bag for my month-long stay at the hospital to kick off my chemotherapy protocol, I was grateful to have more than a coin flip to count on.

TAKEAWAY IDEAS

Who's on your team? Take some time to identify some of the key players who can help you on your own bear hunt. Who do you know who can provide you with motivation? Expertise? Distraction? A listening ear? On the flip side, who's getting in your way of achieving your goals? Be mindful of negative people who might be draining your mojo.



Once you've identified your players, talk to them. Whether you formally invite them to be part of your journey is up to you, but it's important to know who you can turn to when confronted with an obstacle. Below are some of the roles various team members can play. Bottom line? Build a team that's best equipped to handle the challenge at hand.

The Inner Circle

The Rock. Your Rocks are the people in your life you can depend on, no matter what. They're the ones who'll drop everything to help you, the ones you can spazz out on and not worry it'll ruin your relationship, the ones you can call at 2 a.m. to come get you after your car breaks down. They're also the ones who will tell you straight up when you're acting like a total jerk and the ones who'll be more than happy give your butt a whooping when it needs it.

The Motivator. Finding your way through the wilderness can be exhausting—physically, mentally, emotionally. When the tank is running low, seek out your Motivators: the ones who always have a supportive thing to say. Positive energy is contagious. One coffee date with a Motivator can reenergize you for weeks.

The Distractor. Some people will tell you to weed out all distractions and focus on the problem in front of you. However, although hard work and focus are critical, sometimes you just need to take a break. At those times, having someone you can go see a movie with and not talk about whatever you're going through can be exactly what you need.

The Experts

The Pro. Who are the experts you'll need on your team? If you're starting a new business, it could be your web developer, banker, partner and accountant. If you're facing something like cancer, it could be your doctors, nurses, acupuncturist and pharmacist. If you're training for a marathon, it could be your personal trainer, physiotherapist, nutritionist and the dude who sells the gel to keep your nipples from chafing.

The Mentor. Do you know someone who has experienced what you're going through? Whether you're looking for a new career, dealing with the loss of a loved on or picking up the pieces in the aftermath of a broken relationship, find someone who's "been there,

done that.” Not only for advice, but also for inspiration that there is indeed light at the end of the tunnel.

The Unbiased Ear. As great as friends and family can be at listening and understanding, your history means there will always be certain biases and baggage between you. You may be more willing and able to open up to professionals—be it counsellors, therapists, support groups, life coaches or the person at the other end of the crisis hotline—who can offer a more neutral and objective point of view.

The Ones to Be Wary Of

The Buzzkill. Also known as the Naysayer, Party Pooper or Sad Sack, the Buzzkill oozes negativity from his pores. Dissenting opinions and constructive feedback are great, but watch out for people who are doggedly pessimistic.

The Blocker. The Blocker has a knack of derailing your efforts. It could be the co-worker who doesn't pull her weight or the micromanaging boss who doesn't give you any creative latitude. It could be the friend who's an expert at convincing you to go to an all-night kegger when you have an exam the next day. Keep Blockers off your team whenever you can.

The Biscuit. A Biscuit is someone who crumbles under pressure. When dealing with a big challenge, you want people on your team who know how to handle stress. For example, your mother may be the sweetest person in the world, but if she's breaking down and yelling at your doctors every time you go in for a check-up, you may want to bring someone else along.

LESSON #2

COME UP FOR AIR

Don't be afraid to giv'er, but don't giv'er all the time.

Best. Birthday gift. Ever.

Dealing with a major life obstacle can be all-consuming. That's certainly how I felt when I started the induction phase of my chemotherapy protocol in March 2008. As an inpatient, I was to stay at Princess Margaret Hospital for a month while the amazing team on Floor 15 reined in my wild blood counts. During that month, I would eat, sleep and breathe cancer.

When I wasn't receiving chemotherapy, I was thinking about it. It's hard not to. Being hooked up to a whirring and beeping IV stand 24/7, your circumstances quite literally follow you around. From my blood counts written on the whiteboard each morning to the containers I peed in so the nurses could measure my fluid output, CML crept into my every moment.

So preoccupied with trying not to die, I almost forgot about my 28th birthday at the end of the month. I was a bit bummed that I couldn't go out and party with my friends, but true to their awesomeness, they brought the party to me. Under the leadership of my friends Rob, Meagan and Royce—and with a mob of more friends and family than I realized I had—a “human art show” was performed for me on the street far below my hospital room window.

Set to the tune of “Eye of the Tiger,” they ran around the cordoned-off street, forming words and pictures out of their bodies in an amazing choreographed routine. Having seen most of these people on the dance floor, I was impressed they could pull off such elaborate coordination. From high above, I watched them spell out words like Happy Birthday and OneMatch.ca, as well as morphing themselves into a birthday cake, fireworks and even two giant stick figures playing ultimate Frisbee.

The next morning, my nurse came into my room to check my weight and vitals. “You need to have more birthday parties,” she said cheerily. She then proceeded to write down the day's blood counts, which had taken a healthy jump in the right direction since the epic street performance.

Best. Birthday gift. Ever.

A break from the incessant worrying and obsessing was just what the doctor ordered. Well, a potent combination of asparaginase, vincristine and dexamethasone was what the doctor actually ordered. But you know what I mean.

Remembering to breathe

My dad once told us kids, “Don’t be afraid to giv’er, but don’t giv’er all the time.” Sure, it’s not Shakespeare, but great advice nonetheless. Overcoming obstacles takes a lot of hard work, but no one has an infinite supply of energy. Balancing great effort with beneficial pause is crucial.

Breaks allow you to regroup and recharge your mental, emotional and physical batteries. They’re an opportunity to check the map and think strategically. Stepping back from the “one-foot-in-front-of-the-other” grind lets you take stock of the bigger picture and remind yourself of why you’re on your bear hunt.

I could only bury my head in literature about my leukemia for so long before I needed a break. When I found my brain endlessly obsessing about my situation, I’d distract myself with some light reading, a movie or some video games. My friends and family always wanted to know how my treatment was going, but we were sure to balance those heavier conversations with small talk about the weather, politics and whether Batman or Iron Man would win in a fight. (FYI, the answer is Batman. Obviously.)

Navigating obstacles can be a long and difficult process. Don’t forget to come up for air from time to time!

TAKEAWAY IDEAS

Take a focus walk. One technique I use to get out of my head and its jumble of thoughts involves going for a walk and concentrating on just one sensory experience. For example, I may decide to focus on sounds and then make a deliberate effort to take a mental inventory of the various sounds I am hearing at that moment. You’ll be amazed at the symphony going on around you, from birds singing, to cars driving by, to the sound of your footsteps. Or, if I decide to focus on smell, I pay careful attention to the many aromas around me: the smell of flowers, leaves, my deodorant, concrete, or the old man ahead of me who clearly just farted. Bringing your focus to your immediate surroundings is a great way to clear your head and be in the moment.



Meditate. Another way to get out of your head is by focusing on your breathing. Breathe in for a count of four, hold for seven counts, and slowly blow out for eight counts. Repeat this four times in a row twice a day.

Set boundaries. These days, the prevalence of emails and smart phones can tie us to our work 24/7. Whether you implement a strict no-phone rule at dinner, set aside one day a week as date night or join a beginner’s kung fu class, it’s important to make an effort to step away from your bear hunt from time to time.

Switch off the guilt. Don't beat yourself up for wanting to take a break. Breaks not only let you recharge your energy, but a change in scenery can also get the problem-solving juices flowing. I can't count how many times I've been stuck staring at a blank screen with writers' block and how getting away from my desk to do the dishes or go for stroll around the block will jar the ideas loose and give me the words I was looking for.

Go on a retreat. Going on a personal retreat can give you the peace and perspective you need to tackle an obstacle. Pack your bags, get out of town and embrace the clarity that solitude and new surroundings can bring.

Socialize. Even if it's just a half-hour coffee date with an old friend, force yourself to get out of your head and your house. Yes, there's so much to do. But your relationships should be a priority and need to be nurtured and cared for too.

LESSON #3

ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

Life is ever-changing. You should be too.

Jaywalker blues

I left Princess Margaret Hospital beaten up and with even less hair than what I went in with (which wasn't much). While the chemo had taken its toll on me, it worked, hammering the rogue army of cancerous white blood cells into remission. I stepped outside and breathed in fresh air for the first time in over a month. Immediately, my super-chapped lips split and bled everywhere. Small price to pay to be out.

My friends Rob and Julie took me out for a celebratory lunch where I scarfed down so many fajitas, you'd think I was trying to gain back the 20 pounds I had lost in the hospital—and do it all in one sitting. I was hungry. High doses of steroids and six weeks of hospital food will do that to you.

After lunch, we headed toward the pharmacy to fill a prescription. Rather than go all the way to the crosswalk, we opted to make a break for it and jaywalk. I stepped into the street and started to run. Well, I attempted to run. With muscles completely wasted from the chemo, my legs buckled underneath me and it took everything I had to remain upright. Cars sped towards me as I staggered to the other side, begging my legs to work.

It was an important reminder that I was going to have to adapt to a new reality. Things were different now. With my liver already overloaded with all the toxic chemicals the doctors were pouring into me, I couldn't go out for beer with the boys. My weakened immune system meant I couldn't go to crowded movie theatres and had to do my grocery shopping at odd hours. I had to adjust my schedule around my medications, making sure drug A was taken on an empty stomach and drug B with a full one. And yes, sprinting across a busy Toronto street was no longer realistic.

As I adapted to life as a cancer patient, I also quickly realized that my journey from diagnosis to recovery was going to be a zig-zaggy one. I had a treatment plan, but frequent setbacks forced me to constantly modify it. My blood counts would sometimes crash and we would need to postpone some of my chemotherapy. A viral infection would knock me off course on more than one occasion. An adverse response to a particular drug meant the doctors would have to adjust my meds.

Rolling with the punches

Kakuzo Okakura, a Japanese scholar from the 1800s, once said that “The art of life is the constant readjustment to our surroundings.” Setbacks and change derail even the best-laid

plans. We need to learn to roll with the punches. Being flexible is as important as being well prepared.

The path to overcome an obstacle rarely takes a straight line. Setbacks are inevitable. The more responsive and open you are to changing directions, the greater your chances for success.

TAKEAWAY IDEAS

Nurture a flexible attitude. Plans change, things happen, projects get derailed. Acknowledge that setbacks are inevitable so you won't be too discouraged when they do happen.



Be ready with a Plan B. Plan ahead so you can adapt to unexpected changes. Put away extra money to deal with an unpredictable car breakdown or health issue. Don't put all your eggs in a single investment basket. Bring five ideas to the table for when the first four get nixed.

Be open. Keep an open mind. There are a million ways to get from A to B so don't be rigid about your plans. Listen to other people's opinions, ask questions and explore your options. You may have a clear vision of what your engagement photos should look like, but your photographer may have an even better idea.

Let go. Adapting to a new reality means letting go of the past. There's nothing wrong with a little bit of nostalgia and reminiscing. But when that devolves into whining and fixating on how things used to be, then you probably need to give your head a shake and get back to the business at hand.

Find opportunity in obstacles. Embrace change as an opportunity for growth. That big client backing out is an opportunity to introduce fresh ideas to your strategy. That broken leg is an opportunity to catch up on reading. Losing your job is an opportunity to reevaluate your career goals. Fail your way to success by embracing snafus as learning opportunities.

LESSON #4

STAY STRONG

Attitude is everything.

A pooppy rainstorm

Getting drenched in a shower of feces may not seem like the best way to spend an afternoon. Especially while you're in the hospital dealing with a life-threatening illness. Even so, there have been few occasions when I've laughed so hard.

It was October 2008 and I was back as an inpatient at Princess Margaret. After seven months of searching international bone marrow registries, my doctors had finally found me a match. With the anonymous European donor lined up, my weekly chemo outpatient sessions were stopped. Now I had to prepare for the big show: the bone marrow transplant that would (hopefully) cure me of cancer by replacing my garbage stem cells with healthy ones.

My month-long pre- and post-transplant stay in the hospital made my induction phase stint seem like a cakewalk. For starters, they weren't just trying to get my cancer into remission. They were out for total eradication, firebombing my bone marrow into oblivion with heavy-duty chemicals and multiple sessions of total body irradiation.

The transplant itself was pretty tame. I pictured myself undergoing a dramatic operation like Wolverine getting his adamantium skeleton, with long needles boring into my bones and infusing me with new marrow. Instead, I got a little bag hooked up to my IV just like any of the other dozen blood transfusions I'd had.

It didn't take long for the side effects of the transplant, radiation treatment and innumerable drugs I was taking to emerge. During that time, I endured all manner of physical horrors, including nausea, vomiting, mouth sores and a tongue so swollen that I had to sleep in an upright position for a couple nights so I wouldn't choke on it.

I also suffered through a few days of ridiculous diarrhea. I had to keep meticulous track of all my liquid intakes and outputs to help ensure I was getting enough fluids each day, which meant recording the amount of water or juice I drank. It also meant peeing into a container to measure how much I was voiding. And yes, unfortunately, the watery nature of diarrhea meant that I now had to measure those excretions as well. To accomplish this wretched task, I was given a special plastic container that fit over the toilet.

When you're rushing to the toilet every twenty minutes or so, measuring your poop gets tiresome in a real hurry. And it doesn't take long for the container to become intolerably filthy. I decided my poo bucket needed a scrubbing. Befouling my sink where I brush my

teeth was out of the question so I turned to the bidet next to the toilet. I should have held onto the bowl with a firmer grip. I cranked the bidet on full blast and underestimated the strength of the water pressure, as a geyser of water blasted the diarrhea-lined container from my hand and sent it skyrocketing.

The stream of water sent the bowl crashing into the bathroom's high ceiling, and sent torrents of feces-tainted water crashing back onto my head. Although I managed to shut the bidet off quickly, the damage had been done. It looked as though I had been caught in a rainstorm.

My mom, who was with me every day while I was hospitalized, started to wonder what was taking me so long. She asked through the closed bathroom door if everything was all right. Emerging, I sheepishly walked out drenched from head to toe in my own sewage.

Despite the horror of being caught in a deluge of dung, it was exactly the release we both needed and we both broke into fits of uncontrollable laughter. Finding humour in such a difficult situation did wonders for our mood and helped us get through the tough times we were facing.

Yelling at gravestones

"I hear you're unconquerable." That was the first thing my dear friend and mentor, Myrta, told me after I had been diagnosed. I was determined to beat this cancer, and from then on "unconquerable" became my mantra. No matter what the disease did to me physically—even if it killed me—I promised myself I wasn't going to let it beat me mentally, emotionally or spiritually.

I would find other ways to keep myself motivated. In the seven months leading up to my transplant, I would take my dog Stockie for walks in the cemetery behind our house. Passing gravestones, I would point to them and shout "Not yet!" Sure, Stockie gave me a funny look, but that attitude of defiance helped keep me strong.

That's not to say I never had low moments. There were *many*. But keeping a positive attitude kept me from sinking too deeply into the quicksand of depression and despair.

Unlike a container full of diarrhea, just how much my positive outlook aided in my recovery from cancer can't be measured. But I know it kept me psychologically and emotionally fit to deal with the rollercoaster of setbacks and struggles. It helped keep me on track in terms of eating properly, getting enough sleep, taking my medications on time, following my doctors' instructions and getting through treatment. There's no question in my mind that all those factors played an essential role in my physical recovery.

Success involves the ability to laugh at yourself, shrug off difficult situations and stubbornly refuse to quit. The right attitude makes all the difference.

TAKEAWAY IDEAS

Nurture an attitude of gratitude. Remind yourself of all the good stuff in your life. Keep a journal and record all the little things that were good about that day—a tasty meal, sunshine, a visit from a friend. Or keep a jar in your bedroom with slips of paper next to it. Take a moment each night to write something you're thankful for and add it to the jar. Read through your entries at the end of each month or so to help you stay positive and keep things in perspective.



You can also visit www.badgeofawesome.com/list to add your items of gratitude to my Simple Pleasures Project, which was inspired by my experience with cancer.

Surround yourself in the good stuff. Post motivational quotes around your office or bedroom. Listen to uplifting music. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I asked my friend Royce to put together a collection of real-life stories of people from history who had persevered in the face of great challenges. The book was chock full of examples that included Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and other inspirational figures.

Share. Don't keep your feelings bottled up. Sharing how you feel with loved ones can boost your spirits. Articulating your feelings also helps you get your head around your problem—and once you've done that, you're ready to start tackling it.

Create a personal mantra. What's your personal mantra? Identify key objectives and priorities in your life and attach a word or phrase to them. I had two: "Unconquerable," and "I am healthy, I am strong." Write your personal mantra out on a piece of paper and post it somewhere visible. Use it as a way to focus your attention and keep you on track. Take time every day to quietly repeat the words over and over again and meditate on their meaning. If you find yourself in a stressful situation, pull your mantra out of your bag of tricks as a way of calming down and taking control of the situation.

Get outside. It's amazing how a little fresh air and sunshine can improve your mood. Exercise is another important way to stay positive.

Expose yourself to the lighter side of life. Watch funny movies and TV shows or go see a comedy act. Balance out the seriousness of life with a few laughs.

LESSON #5

DIG IN

Big obstacles demand big effort.

From negative to positive

Slowly but surely, my new, Euro-chic stem cells found their way to their new home and started producing normal, healthy blood cells for me. Though I had cleared a major hurdle, I was by no means out of the woods. My doctors kept a watchful eye on me during the critical first 100 days post-transplant, giving me anti-rejection drugs to help my body and its European houseguest get along.

Protected by the equivalent of a newborn's immune system, I was extremely susceptible to infection and still needed to avoid crowds or anyone with the sniffles. The house was dotted with hand sanitizer stations positioned in strategic locations. I even needed to get all my baby shots again. Measles, mumps, rubella: I was a 28-year-old infant. It was like they hit the reset button on me.

Day by day, though, the counts rose, eventually plateauing exactly where they should. I passed the 100-day mark with no relapse and no major fights inside my body. Before long, my new marrow was firing on all cylinders. And perhaps most mind-blowingly of all, my entire blood type switched to that of my donor's—from A-Negative to O-Positive.

Ka. Boom.

Call me Spartan Martin

In 2011, I signed up for a Spartan Race: a five-kilometre obstacle course challenge. As I crawled under barbed wire, leapt over fire and hurled myself over walls, I was reminded of all the personal obstacles I had been forced to face since that fateful coin flip.

I crossed the finish line muddy, bloody and grateful. So very, very grateful. The race was a way to celebrate how lucky I was and how far I had come thanks to the help of an amazing team. But it was also a reminder to me that overcoming obstacles simply takes a lot of preparation, discipline and hard work.

These things played an important role when it came to my battle with leukemia. It included learning as much as I could about my disease, peppering my medical team with tons of questions, stocking my fridge with the right kinds of food, organizing and scheduling my long lists of appointments and medications, forcing my butt out of bed to get exercise, never missing a chemo appointment and doing everything my doctors told

me. It meant putting a plan of action between my goal and me and then digging in to get it done.

Being as prepared as I could for what lay ahead empowered me with a greater sense of control. The more homework and preparation I did about leukemia and my treatment, the less fear and anxiety I felt. And although it was tough to be disciplined about the foods I ate, taking my medication faithfully and getting to all my appointments, the hard work paid off.

TAKEAWAY IDEAS

Create a plan. Write down an action plan to help keep you on track. Keep a schedule of what you want to do, and when, and stick to it. Revisit your action plan and adjust it as needed.



Get it out of your head. If there are a million thoughts bouncing around your brain, take the time to put them on paper. Writing down to-do lists, random ideas, questions and calculations helps you transform mental clutter into structure.

Break it down. Be realistic. Don't set yourself up for failure by committing to working out six days a week, never watching TV again, or becoming a vegan overnight. Ease into your changes rather than sabotaging yourself with unrealistic goals.

Share your goals. To help keep you accountable to your goals, share them with your family and friends. Having other people to keep you motivated is a great way to stay on track.

Do the groundwork. Whether you're researching the ins and outs of a new job prospect, stretching before your adventure race or simply organizing the work site of your project, a little preparation goes a long way.

Be disciplined. Discipline. Discipline. Discipline. The best ideas, attitude and team won't matter unless you're putting the hard work into achieving your goals. Learn to say no if you're feeling stretched, get out of your house to study if you find your TV or roommate distracting or schedule a "work date" with a friend who will motivate you to stay on task.

Celebrate milestones. Set milestones for yourself along the way and celebrate your successes. My journey from diagnosis to recovery seemed to stretch on forever, with no end in sight. Making a point to acknowledge the little achievements along the way—getting through the first phase of chemo, remission, finding a donor, being able to do a push up or walk up a flight of stairs—helped me see that I really was making progress.

HELPING OTHERS OVERCOME OBSTACLES

Being equipped to overcome obstacles on your bear hunt is one thing. But what about when it's a loved one facing a major life challenge? How can you help? Below are some ideas to get you started.

Pitch in. During my time as an outpatient, Wednesdays were chemo days. I'd wake up at the crack of dawn and battle Toronto gridlock from the north end of the city to Princess Margaret Hospital, where I'd spend all day. Most of it was spent waiting. Waiting to get my number called for blood work. Waiting to see the doctor at the clinic. Waiting for my chemo to arrive. Waiting for the chemo to finish. Waiting for the nurse to stick a needle in my butt. Waiting for my prescriptions. And then, finally, waiting once again in bumper-to-bumper traffic to get home. By the time I dragged myself through my front door, I was exhausted and starting to feel the effects of the chemicals that had just been pumped into me.

In one of my email updates to friends and families, I happened to mention how Wednesdays were typically pizza nights because I was just too pooped to make food for myself. Shortly after, my friend Janele told me she had arranged to have meals dropped off at my place. Amazing. Having one less thing to worry about on Wednesdays was wonderful.

There are many ways you can pitch in when someone is going through a challenging or busy time. Whether it's mowing their lawn, dropping off some soup, volunteering at their launch party or helping them assemble their wedding invitations, a little help can go a long way.

Be there. "I don't know what to say." "I feel so helpless." "I wish there was something I could do." We've all been there. That awkward moment when you're at a loss for words and feeling completely useless. But sometimes the thing people need most is a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on. You don't have to come equipped with answers, pearls of wisdom or a magic bullet to solve the problem. Just be there. I heard a story about a friend of mine who worked as a hospital chaplain. One patient lashed out at her, questioning why she was even there. After all, there was nothing she could do to fix the patient's terminal illness. Her response? I'm not here to fix you. I'm here to keep you company while you're going through hell.

Give them space. On the flip side, it's easy to swing too far the other way—to smother a person in well-meaning attempts to help them. Like everything in life, it's all about balance. When I was in the hospital, I had to learn to say no to people who wanted to visit. Not because I didn't want to see them, but because otherwise I'd never have any

time for myself. Be there for them, but respect the fact that they might want some alone time.

Connect them with the right people. You might not be able to directly help, but do you know somebody who could? Leverage your connections. It was my friend's mom who connected me with the doctors at Princess Margaret Hospital. And my brother who recommended a nutritionist friend to help me with my post-transplant diet. Whether you're helping your friend's struggling start-up business by introducing him to your industry contacts or telling a co-worker about a great physiotherapist who worked wonders on your shoulder, rack your brain for helpful people you know.

Stay positive. People going through tough times are wrestling with all sorts of doubt, uncertainty and fear. Help them through that by being a positive influence. During my first month-long stay at Princess Margaret, I hit a wall and was feeling pretty low. Early one morning, before breakfast had even arrived, I got a knock at my door and a co-worker of mine poked his head in the room. At first I was annoyed at the early morning and unscheduled pop-in. I was still in my gotchies after all.

But then we got chatting about his dad, who was also in the hospital undergoing a similar treatment as me. The nonchalant and positive way he talked about his dad's procedures, and the confidence he had that everything was going to be all right, filled me with renewed hope and optimism about my own chances. It ended up being just the wake-up call I needed.

Enthusiasm and positive energy are contagious and can help keep your loved one from getting too low. That doesn't mean being the "everything-is-sunshine-and-unicorns" person that people want to slap. It just means offering encouragement instead of discouragement, optimism instead of pessimism and constructive feedback instead of harsh criticism.

Get creative. In the section on coming up for air (Lesson #2), I mentioned the human art show my friends and family performed for my birthday. Another uplifting and awesome thing they pulled together for me was a "Book of Encouragement."

My sister Becky coordinated this project while I was in hospital for the bone marrow transplant. Becky went around to my aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, grandma and parents and invited each of them to create a page for the book, wishing me well on my recovery and health journey.

Like the birthday surprise, I didn't know about the book until Becky delivered it to me in my hospital room. And like the birthday surprise, it gave my spirits such a great and much-needed boost. I laughed myself silly (a dangerous thing to do when dealing with the menace of ferocious diarrhoea) reading the many hilarious and creative entries and felt my resolve strengthen as I read the many inspirational and motivational notes.

If you're looking for ways to help someone overcome an obstacle, get creative. Send a fun e-card. Film a video of friends giving encouraging shout-outs. Bake a good-luck cake. Plaster their bedroom with motivational quotes. Host a pasta dinner fundraiser.

Distract them. Everybody needs to come up for air once in a while. It might seem counterintuitive, but taking a buddy out for a few beers when they're completely buried with work may be the best thing for them. The pooppy rainstorm I got caught in may have been crappy (pun intended), but it was exactly the distraction mom and I needed from the stress of the situation. Just remember: It's a fine line between distraction and disruption, so tread carefully.

Rally around a cause. When someone you care about is going through a tough time—especially when it's health-related—the feeling of helplessness can be overwhelming. After I was diagnosed, I told Dr. Lipton that my friends were eager to help and asked if he had any suggestions. “Tell them to donate blood,” he said.

Rallying around a cause for your loved one is a great way to make important contributions. It could be spearheading a blood drive or signing up for a charity fun run in honour of your friend with cancer. It could be writing your MP or raising awareness through the media about the mental illness your dad is dealing with. It could be volunteering at a women's shelter to show your support for a co-worker getting out of an abusive relationship.

Of course, you don't have to know someone to help them overcome obstacles. The world is full of challenges and people who could use a helping hand. Whether you're volunteering with a community organization, donating to disaster relief overseas or simply offering your seat to the pregnant woman on the bus, there are always ways to help.



CONCLUSION

I celebrated St. Paddy's Day 2009 by having the IV port in my chest removed. By the summer I was able to do 10 push ups without collapsing. And by my first transplant anniversary, I was given the thumbs up to return to work.

My immune system will always be less than spectacular, and I still need to go to Princess Margaret a couple times a year for blood work. In those regards, the bear hunt continues. But the trail's gotten much smoother. And while I'm not naive enough to believe that I won't encounter major obstacles in the future, I'm thrilled to have successfully overcome the ones I have.

It takes more than luck to navigate through the wildernesses of our lives. It's not enough to flip a coin and hope for the best. A successful bear hunt depends on so much more. It requires teamwork, balance, flexibility, positive thinking and a whole lot of hard work.

Lady Luck played her part in my own hunt, no doubt. But more important, I think, was my decision to take charge and do everything in my power to surround myself with the right people and arm myself with the right weapons to survive.

Whatever obstacles you face on your own personal bear hunt, remember: It's not the size of the obstacle that matters. It's how you respond to it that really counts.

