



Coping with the Anxiety and Worry of Recurrence

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Melanoma Survivor and Advocate

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Andrew Schorr:

So first of all, let's talk with you for a second. So you got the melanoma diagnosis. You knew there was a chance it would come back.

So how did you go through those years before it happened? Was it in your mind at all? Or how did you face that?

T.J. Sharpe:

It was. But it was in the forefront of my mind when I did things like put sunscreen on, stay out of the sun for long periods of time, wear long-sleeved shirts. But I don't know if it was ever in my mind that it could really happen because of something. Because my recurrence actually happened from the original cancer. So it wasn't the sun that caused it. And I never considered that. I wasn't aware of it. And I don't think I ever lived in fear of it coming back. And I believe now that my sort of lesson learned from that is yes, it can come back to you.

And keeping myself healthy probably all of those years would have been—more healthy would have been a good idea.

Andrew Schorr:

We're going to talk more about staying healthy. But one of the things, so then the worst happens and kind of in stages.

The worst happens is you're diagnosed with this huge tumor in your abdomen. And you're having a colostomy, and all these terrible things seem to be happening to try to get you to a better place. And it's just kind of unfolding, and you're in different trials. And some are working and some are not. You didn't know you were going to get to where you are now where it is working. How did you get through that? And how did your wife get through that?

T.J. Sharpe:

The second answer is much harder than the first one. I don't know how she got through it. And we talked to a few people at lunch about it was difficult for me. But it was very easy—or very simple, I'm sorry. I focused on being healthy, getting healthy. I knew that we had to go through the treatment, and I only had two options. And the second option was pretty lousy. So the first option was suck it up, do everything I can to stay healthy, and get through the treatment, and just make it through that treatment that day. Tomorrow is the next day, and we'll keep fighting sort of one day at a time. And I think a lot of cancer patients say that.

But when you're in the midst of treatment, it really becomes a one day at a time. And then the first part of the answer is you focus on my daughter is 2-½ years old. My son is a little peanut guy. I want to wrestle with him on the carpet when he's

5 or 10. And we want to walk that little girl down the aisle. I want to be there when her first boyfriend shows up in my front yard with my arms crossed looking like you better get her home by when she should be home. And I talked with another patient already today about how do you even talk with them about that? And that became the focus of I need my family as much as my family needs me. And it's very symbiotic.

Andrew Schorr:

Did you allow yourself to be angry at any point? Did you ever feel like you needed to scream or cry?

T.J. Sharpe:

Yes to crying. I don't know if I ever screamed. I got more upset about the people that I think lost their battle than myself.

I would get emotional more about is this all I'm going to get? I remember distinctly at Josie's birthday two years ago, and not making it through the birthday party. Not being able to help set up or break down. Having to go back and throw up and then sort of just pass out for an hour and feeling like I'm supposed to be the caretaker of my family, and I can't even get through a kid's birthday party. And one of the things that I talked about with quite a few people is I said, okay, that was a bad day. And cancer won that day. But tomorrow is another day.

And I'll take that day, and I'll put it in a box and put it on a shelf somewhere and say, okay, I'm not going to win every day. But I have tomorrow. And tomorrow is going to be a day that I do everything I can do that I beat cancer, whether it's physically, mentally or emotionally. I'm going to make my life tomorrow better than it was today. And I'm going to spend the time to be healthy, to be with my family, to make a difference in other patients' lives.

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