



WHITEPAPER

When health and performance converge: What I (re) learned from cancer.

BY DR. PETER JENSEN



One week before the opening of the Vancouver Olympics I was in Jasper at a training camp working with the women's Olympic Hockey team. Several days earlier I had gone to a specialist in Toronto to investigate a small growth on my neck. While in Jasper I got a call saying that I had throat and neck cancer.

As many of you know, we teach a program called Building Resilience that applies sport psychology skills to the management arena. The program focuses on the same skills we teach elite athletes to prepare them for the pressure they will have to manage in order to perform at their best. This article is about how I used some of the skills we teach to assist me in meeting this difficult challenge.

This is a somewhat personal article that is not intended as a 'how to deal with cancer' playbook. Each person who is faced with a health crisis will need to work out what to do and not do while attempting to cope with and emerge whole from such an experience. I used these skills to assist me in getting through a very difficult and challenging time.

SUPPORT SEEKING

Many of you who have been to our Building Resilience program will recall the Resiliency Map. It is a fabulous self assessment instrument we use to assess one's current capacity to handle pressures. One of the skills from that instrument that I view as critical to my successful passage through this ordeal was support seeking.

Sometimes we have the illusion we can do all things ourselves. And if it's especially difficult or unpleasant then we should take care of it ourselves and not bother others. And mostly that is how I have lived my life. Someone once said, "you have to do it yourself, but you can't do it alone." Those words ring so true for me. My wife Sandra became my advocate, researcher, ally, etc. Close friends came forward and put together a support group to help Sandra and I through this. They set up a driving schedule to get me to treatments, support for Sandra, meals, and other helpful interventions. Co-workers stepped up to the plate and took on extra responsibilities. At the outset I really thought I would get myself to daily treatments. Thank goodness for other people. I had to learn to let go and accept the help. It freed me up to focus on 'my performance'—what I had to do to get through the very difficult 7 weeks of radiation and the tough weeks that followed that.





PERSPECTIVE

Another invaluable skill from the Resiliency Map was maintaining a positive outlook. We at Third Factor call it maintaining perspective. Cancer treatment is very different than other setbacks or injuries. If I break my leg, sprain an ankle, get an infection, etc., things generally get better as time progresses—not so with cancer treatment. Things get worse, much worse, from week 1 to week 8 or 9.

I chose to focus on things over which I had control; things I could accomplish, things that I believed would make a difference to my long term recovery.

I took a 10-week perspective. I had been told by others, who had gone through similar treatment, that the weeks after the treatment are the most difficult as radiation levels are still increasing. I also chose to focus on things over which I had control; things I could accomplish, things that I believed would make a difference to my long term recovery. I followed a very tight schedule of interventions Sandra had researched that would minimize the side effects the treatment would have on me. I spent no time lamenting my fate, asking “why me?”—why not me? Every day at the hospital I saw numerous brave souls who had a much greater hill to climb than I did.

IMAGERY

I did my best to stay in touch with how I wanted to be, look, and feel down the road—when everything was over and I had recovered. Much of my imagery was spontaneous ‘mini movies’ in the course of the day. And much of it was very directed and intentional.



I used some imagery exercises specific to cancer treatment and put them on my iPod. Some were about healing, some focused on imagery related to the radiation, and some were about how I wanted to look and feel in 6 months.

Being an active person, I imagined myself back running and doing resistance training—being strong and moving freely and with ease—a bit of a stretch if you’ve ever seen me run!

There is a subtle but very important difference internally between making oneself do something and choosing to do something.

I believe, and I teach, that imagery is the language of the body. I wanted to stay in constant contact with my body letting it know where we were headed and what the goal was. I wanted to make sure that I supported my body at every level to do what it had to do to heal; and that included mentally and emotionally. Imagery is the most wholistic language we speak.

FOCUS AND FREE WILL

Willpower is often seen as pushing oneself even when we don’t want to act, feel like doing anything, etc. That process of ‘making’ oneself do something can be draining and very difficult to sustain over time. Instead I ‘chose’ to put my head down and focus on what I needed to do on a daily basis.

There is a subtle but very important difference internally between making oneself do something and choosing to do something. Everyday I consciously chose to do what I needed to do to increase the probability that I would come through the treatment with the least amount of damage possible. Yes, I often didn’t want to swallow, for example, L-Glutamine—but I chose to do it. I let Sandra and the others focus on the bigger picture of what I needed to do. I focused on getting all the interventions, 15 to 20 every day, done. I chose to do everything I could to support my body and mind in getting through this.





EXPECT AND DEAL WITH SETBACKS

Almost everyone who is dealing with the health system over a period of time is going to run into a setback, a foul up, a mistake, a wrong turn, etc. Very early on Sandra and I had a discussion on setbacks. A small one had occurred. We said it wouldn't be the last and that we needed to be able to deal with disappointments, errors, etc. effectively and efficiently. We can't waste time wallowing in the mud, getting angry or scared, losing energy and hope, when things don't go as expected. We were severely tested on several occasions but our corrective and collective resolve was vital.

STAND UP FOR YOURSELF—OR HAVE A PARTNER WHO WILL STAND UP FOR YOU

Ultimately you have to take responsibility for your own health care. The medical people can only do so much, know so much, and may not be as vigilant as you would like. We had several places on the journey when we had to put forward what we believed needed to happen. In all instances, in retrospect, those were important moments that lead to a better solution, better outcome etc. Personal power, in relation to your health, is vital. Some of the most successful patients are often a pain in the rear to the medical profession.

There are many other skills we teach in Building Resilience that can assist in dealing with any challenge. They help us recalibrate and regroup when the pressure or stressor is one we cannot eliminate or change. I consider that ability to be as critical to my health as eating good food and exercising.

Dr. Peter Jensen is the founder of Third Factor and currently cancer-free.

Copyright © 2010-2020 Third Factor. All rights reserved.

We welcome your comments on this article. Please send them to mail@thirdfactor.com

Learn more at www.thirdfactor.com