



Lessons from a Cancer Survivor

by Shawnda Muir

2007 started off like any other new year, full of hope and promise. But, in February, six short weeks later, everything changed. We experienced three diagnoses of cancer in my immediate family within six months.

First, my husband Darryl was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Then, in April, my father was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma called Burkitt's, and passed away three weeks later. Lastly, I received a breast cancer diagnosis in August. While my breast cancer was successfully treated in 2007, my story continues, as I was diagnosed with malignant melanoma, an aggressive form of skin cancer, in May 2011.

My family's experiences with cancer have taught me many life lessons which I hope will help you too.

Positive thinking - The importance of positive thinking is one of the main lessons I learned during my journey. It was critical for surviving the shock of the initial diagnosis of my husband's cancer as well as what followed.

Unfortunately, life will deal us all many challenges but I'm a firm believer that having a positive attitude will help you cope with your challenges much better. While thinking positive may not always result in the outcome you hope for, it will help make the journey be more enjoyable.

You have no control over being diagnosed with cancer but you do have control over your thinking as you progress through your cancer journey. Find ways to remain positive:

1. *Determine the worst case scenario and develop a plan for how you would handle it.* Then, put it aside and focus on the best case scenario.
2. *Look for the silver linings in each situation.* In my case, cancer provided me with a year off work with extra time to strengthen my relationship with my boys.
3. *Find something positive to focus on.* It doesn't have to be big, just something positive that you're excited about.
4. *Focus on the glass being half full, not half empty.* I focused on the days I could spend at the cottage with my family instead of the days I spent in hospital having treatments.
5. *Surround yourself with positive people.* Reach out to people around you who are positive and supportive. They may be other cancer survivors, councilors, friends or family.

6. *Be grateful for all the good things in your life. You'll feel the positive feelings grow within you.*

Take care of yourself first - Did you know that taking on a healthier lifestyle can reduce your chance of getting cancer by up to 50% (other diseases as well!). As I learned at a CancerCare Manitoba retreat, taking care of yourself is just as important in preventing cancer from recurring as is taking your medicine. And the key is taking care of yourself **FIRST** to ensure you survive your treatments so you can be there for others in the long run.

Start taking good care of yourself now on the four key dimensions: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Live your ideal life – So many times, people wait for a loved one to be diagnosed with an illness before they take time to assess their happiness in life. Don't wait. Take the time now to know what makes you happy and then start making the required changes to achieve your ideal life. When I received my second cancer diagnosis, it was the most peaceful feeling to realize I'd have no regrets even if I were to die shortly. There are no changes in my life I'd want to make. I'm living my ideal life now and it feels wonderful. You can too by following these three steps (I provide more details in my book *Cancer Scores a Hat Trick*):

1. Know What You Want
2. Focus on What You Want
3. Get What You Want

Daily happiness checklist - I created this list during my journey for living a happy, healthy and fulfilling life. Personalize it for yourself and try it out!

- *Begin and end each day with positive reflection*, such as appreciation and gratitude for all the positive things in your life.
- *Plan at least one activity per day that you're looking forward to*. Then consciously think about this activity often during the day.
- *Exercise daily*. Remember to take care of yourself first.
- *Be present*. Take time to enjoy your family, colleagues, friends and each event that happens in your day.
- *Perform an act of kindness*. Doing something for someone else is a sure way to make yourself feel better.

Read inspiring books - Following are some I read during my cancer journey to help me be happy:

- Law of Attraction – Michael Losier
- Don't Sweat the Small Stuff – Richard Carlson
- Happier – Tal Ben-Shahar
- The How of Happiness – Sonja Lyubomirsky
- Happy for No Reason – Marci Shimoff
- Peaks & Valleys – Spencer Johnson
- The Present – Spencer Johnson
- How Full is Your Bucket? – Tom Rath & Donald Clifton
- Mastering the Art of Coping in Good Times and Bad – Linda Edgar

Check out my website www.shawndamuir.com where I include more inspiring and helpful material:

- Cancer Tips... every day tips for patients, family and friends
- Inspiration, Hope and Lessons for Overcoming Challenges in Life

- Techniques for Reducing Stress
- Blog site articles
- Cancer Scores a Hat Trick – Lessons About Living Life to the Fullest

Seek cancer support right away. There is a tremendous amount of information and support available from CancerCare Manitoba to help you and your family get through your diagnosis, treatments and life after cancer. I strongly encourage you to contact CancerCare Manitoba early in your journey to learn more about the support available to you:

- CancerCare Manitoba – 675 McDermot Ave. 787-2197
- St. Boniface Unit O Block – 409 Tache Ave. 237-2559
- No-Charge Dial Both Units – 1-866-561-1026
- Patient & Family Support Services
 - Psychosocial Oncology
 - 675 McDermot Ave – 787-2109
 - St. Boniface Unit – 237-2006
 - Nutrition Services – 787-2109
 - Patient & Family Resource Center – 787-4357
 - Guardian Angel Caring Room – 787-4180
 - CCMB Breast Cancer Centre of Hope – 691 Wolseley Ave. 788-8080 No-Charge Dial 1-888-660-4866
 - Community Cancer Programs Network – 787-5159
 - Patient Representative – 787-2065
- The Navigator – a newsletter created for people living with cancer and their families. To view it online or to search CancerCare Manitoba's website, visit www.cancercare.mb.ca To receive a copy by mail, call 788-8082.

You can do it! Where ever you are in your journey, one step at a time is all that's needed for positive change in your life. Good luck. You can do it!

Since my cancer journey in 2007, I've left my long-time corporate career so I could achieve better balance in my life and to spend more time with my family. And now I do speeches and workshops to share the lessons I've learned about transforming your life, even in the face of adversity. In 2011, I published a book called Cancer Scores a Hat Trick – Lessons About Living Life to the Fullest which describes my family's experiences with cancer and provides a guide to help everyone make positive changes in their life. I donate \$5.00 from the sale of each book to CancerCare Manitoba. If you're interested, please visit www.shawndamuir.com

