



Doug, Brain Cancer patient

My name is Doug Baker. Three years ago I was diagnosed with cancer and it was a Grade 3 or 4 brain tumour. It was one of those big scares in my life where it was potentially something that would be life-ending. But the great news was that changed and it was Grade 1 and it was something that was fully removable. Since then I have been able to move on and work on the healing process of getting better and feel my life is better for it.

Big questions, big decisions

Following the surgery I was originally coming out and thinking everything was wonderful. My family, I learned later on, were putting on a brave face for me because the neurosurgeon had followed up after and said the prognosis is not actually that great, it's probably going to be Grade 3 or 4. From what he was able to remove and from his experience he said, 'This is going to be something that will be very aggressive. It's going to be growing and it's going to be spreading. It's something that will probably limit his life to around a year if he's lucky.'

So, as I was going through the process of recovering, my family was very good about trying to break that news to me slowly which in some ways was appreciated and in other ways not appreciated because I'm the type of guy that would love to know the details as soon as possible. 'What are we dealing with? What's happening?' And when I first found out about that, the challenge that I had, I had to ask myself, 'If I were to go ahead and die, would I be okay with that? Do I feel like my life has been good, full enough?' You think about movies like the Bucket List. Do I have a list of things that I still need to go through and complete? Are there things that I have — dreams — that I have that I haven't finished yet or completed? And then with this the most incredible thing happened. My girlfriend said, 'It's better for us to go ahead and have a life together, even if it's short, because I don't want to go ahead and have this time where we could have had something, and then to lose you. So, no matter what, I want to have this time where we could spend together and be committed and have a relationship.' And, of course, having that great speech I said yes. I said that it was the best proposal ever. She responded back by saying, 'No you're going to propose to me and get me my ring.' And we went ahead and moved forward with that and got to do one of the most incredible things ever. We planned a wedding in 10 days.

A gift

I think the best wedding gift that we received was our update from our doctor. He said 'We've gone ahead and we've got back the report and it seems as if the tumour is not

actually Grade 3 or 4. It's a Grade 1. And it's not actually aggressive. And it's not growing back. As of right now, you don't need chemo and radiation. Everything seems to be doing okay. And if this keeps up, you could have a much longer life.' So we were really, really excited about that. We were ecstatic. We were going to be able to go ahead and move forward. And the question of course that we asked ourselves was looking back, do we still want to go ahead and do the wedding now, now that we know that we have more time? Do we want to plan more of a full wedding, get all of the bells and whistles? But my wife had said 'No, let's go ahead and let's simply do this.'

Encouragement

It was a real challenge because I had all these people around me when I was going through even the process before surgery. They were coming in to... 'encourage' me. And they came in and they were upset, and you could see that they were crying or had just been crying, or that they were trying to encourage me by saying 'It's okay'. And tapping your leg. It was actually a real challenge for me because I found that more than anything I was encouraging them. I was the person that was sitting in the hospital bed saying, 'Everything is okay. I know it's tough right now. I know a lot of stuff is crazy but I'll be fine. Everything is good. I'm in good hands. I have a great doctor. St. Mike's is a wonderful hospital.' And so it was a challenge because as much as I had to encourage people, it gave me something to do and I felt like I was able to take that on as one of my missions. It made me feel like I was being active and not having all these people merely helping me but I was able to help them too. And so...yeah I just would encourage anyone who is going through that... when you're going through something that difficult and that hard, as much as the people around you are trying to encourage you and look after you, you mean something to them. So it will be hitting them just as hard as you. So always remember too that it's a two way street. So if you can go ahead and encourage them then they'll be able to encourage you back.

Recovery

The recovery was actually a very... it was a very challenging process. One of the biggest things that came up that I didn't expect was... the doctor explained it to me like this, he said when you're recovering from something that had to do with the brain, recovery isn't linear. It won't be progressive, slowly moving forward. You'll encounter something more like a circle. You'll feel really, really good — everything is going well and then you'll have some kind of relapse and you'll go back. You'll have bad days. And I was like 'Okay, but theoretically I'm still moving forward right?' And he said, 'Well, it's one of those things that's more circular than simple.' And I thought to myself, 'Okay, I don't really understand that. I'm sure no matter what everything is going well for me.' And since that time, I had been doing really well. I had been recovering really, really quickly. I was able to move around a lot, my swelling was going down, I was having fun, life was great.

I thought I was doing so good. And then I realized all through this process that something was still off. I wasn't fully back yet. I was having a hard time with my speech and with my communication. Just with where my tumour was located — it was in my left temporal lobe and it's all of my communication centre —so no matter what I was thinking, I would say. I had no filter. Everything came out, and I was like, 'Wow this is a challenge.' My wife was really good with this process because that's what we're going

through — we're newly married, we're supposed to be in our honeymoon stage, and meanwhile I'm telling her every time that she happens to maybe do something wrong, or look wrong, or any time she happens to do something that doesn't agree with me. And by wrong I mean disagree with me. But it's incredible because she understood that even though I was saying these things it wasn't the fact that I was really meaning them — they were just blurting out. They were coming out and it wasn't me. It wasn't how I felt about her. And so her understanding and forgiveness was huge.

Control

When you're in a situation like that you really don't have many things under control. You don't have any control over so many different factors or elements and being humans we love to control everything. That's our way, that's our personality, the way we function, the way we like our life to be. And so that was a challenge for me because I was having to accept that I don't have control. And accept that. But then say, 'Okay, well I don't have control over my health. Well, I don't have control over when I can do my surgery. Well, I don't have control over you know how these different effects will, you know, change my life. What I can do and what I can control is how other people around me will see it. How other people around me will see me. And how they'll feel about what I need.' And so it was incredible because I was able to show them that I'm fine, I'm accepting this, I'm good. And if I can do that, you guys can too. And the great thing about that is once you all accept it it's easier to go ahead and move on and get the next step taken care of as opposed to worrying about, 'This is horrible. My life is ruined. What's this going to do? How am I going to feel? How are they going to feel?' So it was a strong choice and I know looking back that it was one of the things that was one of the best choices that I could make.

Healing

I would have to say that going through the recovery process there were a lot of checks that came up and often flags where I tried to get myself too quickly into something. One of the biggest things for that was my school. I had this thing where I figured as soon as I go ahead and get back into my classes, I'll be able to feel better about myself. I'll be able to feel like I am truly recovering. Those were goals that I'd set up for myself and once I was doing those I was normal again. I was able to be back in my normal life and I did try to move too quick. I freely admit that now. And I would encourage other people that it will take time. But at the same time it's a very hard thing to do, patience sometimes is so hard and I realized, you know, that it is going to take time. I can't just magically jump back into this. And it's one of those things where it's not a bad thing. As much as I feel as if it's something where I'm not being completely myself or not doing the things that are my life... it's going to take a while.

What is normal?

I found that with myself one of the challenges with moving forward and recovering has been accepting, of course, that it could always be a part of my life. And if it is, what then would be normal for me? What then would be a normal life? So the challenge with that was saying, you know what, if it comes up again? There's nothing I can do about it and worrying is not going to help me. A really corny saying but one that I really enjoy is, 'Worrying is like sitting in a rocking chair — it'll keep you busy all day long but you're not

getting anywhere.' And so I took that as saying — you know what? I'm not going to worry about it. I can't worry about it. If it comes up, it comes up again. And I need to press forward and moving on, but also be able to encourage those people around me that are worriers. And that we're thinking about that and saying 'Guys if I can accept this and be okay with it, can't you?' So again, a long process, but it's something that is life or death because you have to be able to work with what you have. You have to be able to cope with it, and if you will always be stressing and worrying about it you will never fully recover because you're always going to have that in the back of your mind. You're always going to be thinking about that and normal life will never be possible again because you're making it impossible because you're thinking about cancer all the time and not life.