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Caring for My Dying Father Changed Me Forever

I'll never forget when I found out that my dad had prostate cancer. It was Christmas Eve and something was off. I could feel that my mom and dad were on edge a little bit. I felt like there was a secret they were keeping. When I asked if something was going on, my mom's face said it all. Of course it wasn't her secret to tell, so I asked, "Does Dad have cancer?" The answer was yes.

As the tears poured from my eyes my dad quickly came to my side to ensure me that it was *just* prostate cancer, something very curable and common for older men. A feeling deep in the pit of my stomach told me differently.

Fast forward to late April 2017. My dad was supposedly in remission. His prostate had been removed back in September of 2016 and after two separate visits to the Mayo Clinic with a ton of blood work, we were elated to hear he was cancer free. That's why we didn't see it coming...

My dad had severe pain in his back and his doctor was not sure why. He was one of those guys who would rather push through the pain than push the doctors to test further. He pushed until he couldn't take it anymore and late one night in April he was rushed to the ER. We found out he had three cracked vertebrae, which explains the crazy pain he was in. Cracked vertebrae are not common. There are only three things that can cause this: trauma, osteoporosis and cancer. Since there was no trauma, we prayed for osteoporosis, which seems so silly to pray for, but up against cancer, it was our silver lining. Unfortunately, our wish didn't come true. What was true was the cancer in my father's prostate had metastasized, meaning it spread to other parts of his body. We were so confused. How could we be told he was cancer free if he wasn't? When did the cancer spread and how did they not catch it? What was going to happen now? How can we cure this? What are we going to do?

This is when my life changed forever. I went from being a 30-year-old woman without too many cares in the world to being a caregiver fighting for my father's life.

Over the summer I was still figuring it all out. Still discovering the hurdles, the struggles and learning to celebrate the small victories.

There's another part to caregiving though... the part when the one you love doesn't make it. You are fighting for their life, but you aren't guaranteed to win that fight. And, in my case, I lost the fight when my dad lost his battle with cancer.

Now that my dad has been gone for seven months, I'm finally ready to put my reflections to paper. I spent the whole summer back and forth from California to Florida to care for my father. My mom, sister, brother and I were sort of his home nurses on rotation, with my mom being the head nurse. We all learned a lot about life that summer. I attribute most of that to the role of being a caregiver and how drastically your life changes when that role begins. Like our Springible Team has said before, it's not something you can prepare yourself for. It's not something that's on your calendar. It happens in an instant. Here's how becoming a caregiver changed me.

Patience

While my personality has always been pretty laid back, patience was not an adjective I would use to describe myself prior to my dad's illness. It was something I had to learn very quickly though. When you are a caregiver to someone who is in an immense amount of pain and can't care for themselves, you have to be their rock. They are frustrated. They want answers from the doctors, test results, and progression just as badly as you do. I learned that patience would be one of my greatest tools and would provide ease and comfort to my dad. Many times when I would bring my dad food he would have some sort of complaint...

"Why would you make me a sandwich when I can't sit up!"

"Did you pick the shallowest bowl possible to put the soup in so I would spill it on myself?"

"I don't want to try to get up today! I'm in too much pain, and don't even tell me to take a deep breath!"

I learned to take the deep breath myself, buy an extra large coffee cup for soup and cross sandwiches off the menu. I also learned that being patient with him was important. There was no way that I could understand what he was going through. No

way that I could feel the pain he felt or the uncertainty of his life.

This tool didn't go away when my dad left us. I see myself in situations now where the old me would say "ain't nobody got time for that", and I make time for it. I slow down and take a deep breath. Patience truly is a virtue.

Empathy

I always thought I was a very empathetic person. That thought changed when I became a caregiver and learned the difference between sympathy and empathy. I used to have sympathy for those who were less fortunate, disabled or going through a hard time, feeling compassion and sorrow for their situation. When I became a caregiver I truly learned what empathy is. In order to provide my dad the best care I was capable of, I had to be empathetic to his situation. I had to try to understand what it must feel like to not know if you will ever walk again, and then how it must feel when you learn you never will. I had to think of what would make life easier, if only for a minute, if I was in his situation.

I apply this now in my life much more than ever. I don't look at homeless people and think "*oh, isn't that horrible*". Now, I look at them and think, "*where do they sleep at night, and do they have enough blankets to make it through the cold winter?*". I see cancer patients who are going through chemo and instead of thinking "*ugh, that would be the worst!*" I think, "*YOU GO! KICK THAT CANCER'S ASS!*" and I cheer them on for having the strength to go out in public and enjoy life. And when I realize that I have this newfound sense of empathy, I smile, because it was my dad who helped teach me that lesson. (If you aren't sure that you know the difference, check out [this great video](#) that breaks it down!)

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

Thinking back to what life was like before I found out about my dad's cancer makes me laugh. In my mind I had this hectic life full of work and traveling to weddings and bachelorette parties. I was constantly having to make the tough decision between what friend's event I would be able to attend. I was worn out from traveling all over the US to amazing cities for work. I would find myself getting upset over things that at the time seemed like such a big deal, but now in retrospect, were so silly.

Becoming a caregiver teaches you a different side of life- a side you have much less control over. It trains you to take the little annoyances in life and push through, because you don't have time to fret over forgetting to bring your reusable bag to the grocery store for the third time in a row. You learn that life can and will be so much more difficult at some point, so don't waste time sweating the small stuff.

Find Joy

Some days this can seem impossible, finding joy. It's like everything that could go wrong does and things seem to go from bad to worse. It's important to always find the joy in life. I find now that I look for this in my life more than ever before. I don't think I'll ever be over the loss of my dad. I don't think I'm supposed to ever get over it. But, what I do know is that I can't sit in sadness because he is gone. I must find joy in my day and in my life. Whether it's a Frank Sinatra song that reminds me of my dad or just a beautiful sunrise, I now realize these moment more than ever and take a moment to acknowledge them. Trust me, even in the darkest of days, there is joy.

Embrace that Life Does Go On

Even when you don't want it to, life does go on. Over the last several months I have been looking at the calendar surprised when another month is complete. Another month of living a life without my dad in it. At first this made me very sad. I was overwhelmed with sadness when I started a new endeavor or met a new friend, thinking *"my dad will never know this part of my life."* Here's the thing—we have no control over time. It keeps ticking along even when we are begging for it to stop for just a minute or two.

You have to embrace that, because there's something beautiful about progression and forward movement. And, instead of living my new moments in sadness because my dad isn't here to celebrate them with me, I've decided it's ok. He is still here and he's pushing me right along in this life, cheering by my side all the way. It's my job to keep his memory alive and bring him with me on every step of the journey. Embrace the new life that's before you. It can be a pretty special time if you let it be.

Springible is a solutions based, consumer-driven, lifestyle platform for caregivers, and people living with disability, special needs, and chronic illness.

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