

How old were you when you were first diagnosed with ALL?

I was 10 years old when I was diagnosed. At that age I didn't have much of an idea of what was going on, but as the months dragged on into years I began to understand the seriousness of the setback that I was facing.

How long was your treatment? How long have you been in remission?

The treatment was a 3 year deal. At the start there was a lot of medicine and a lot of hospital visits which I really struggled with, but as the years progressed it became a routine that I had to deal with and my main priority. I think it made me grow up a lot quicker because I had to confront something most kids don't have to worry about. It's interesting to compare the priorities I had at that age to the priorities my friends had. Their main priorities were having fun with friends at school and playing sport on the weekend.... I've been in remission for 4 years now and loving every bit of it, I'm so grateful that I've come out of this alive, meaning I wouldn't be able to share my story if I wasn't alive and as in I feel so alive and healthy and can't wait to take on these coming years.

Your dad tells me you're a hard worker, with a very positive attitude. These attributes must have helped you get through the treatment. What techniques did you use? What else helped?

You can ask my friends if I'm a hard worker and it's safe to say that everyone would agree with that. There are times when I can be a bit slack, but when you're faced with an illness that is trying to kill you there are two ways you can go about it: you can stand up and face your enemy or you can back down and accept defeat. I carried this motto through the treatment and it very much saved my life.

Chemotherapy is going to do everything it can to stop the cancer from attacking your body. When the cancer knows it can't spread any further it's going to attack your thoughts and make you as weak minded as possible, make you ask those questions "Am I dying?" "Is this medicine working?" "Why me? This isn't fair". If you let cancer get into your mind you are going down the path of defeat. Being a strong-minded person and carrying a positive attitude is half the key.

How did you deal with the hospital stays?

I found the time spent in hospital extremely hard because being hospitalised for just under a month on a regular basis means that you essentially live in a setting that constantly reminds you of your illness, when all you want is to focus on living a normal life.

On short stays it was good to see familiar faces and I always felt reassured that I was in the right hands. On the long stays my attitude became much more negative. The wards had such a depressing atmosphere, especially in the weeks leading up to Christmas because everyone wanted to get the all clear to go home.

I found that taking little things from my home like a blanket or pillow helped tremendously and created a warm and safe environment that made me feel more at home.

I tried to find a hobby that I could do from the hospital room to keep me busy. Hobbies helped keep my mind active and focused on something other than cancer. For example, if you enjoy creating art, bring a sketchpad and pencils so you can draw while in your hospital bed.



Did you have any in-hospital support, such as social workers or psychologists that helped you deal with the experience?

I believe during those first few weeks there was a therapist that came in for a chat. They were also there for mum and dad because they knew nothing about the illness and had to get their heads around everything as much as I did. I think after that once my parents had a better understanding about what was going on, they became my psychologists because I was comfortable talking to them.

Was it tough being away from friends, family and loved ones for long periods of time?

It was really tough during those long stays because I wasn't used to not having my friends around me. Especially as we didn't have Facebook or Skype so you couldn't really keep in touch and catch up on what's been going on. In a way I sort of liked it because when my friends and family came to visit it was that much more special. I understand it was tough for friends and family who hadn't seen me for ages and they didn't know what to say. I mean, my friends and I used to complain about having two of the same footy cards in a pack! These are everyday life problems that a normal young kid faces compared to the problems I was facing. So sometimes it was hard to connect when they visited.

How did they support you through your treatment?

My friends and family were so supportive during those years and I couldn't have done it without them. Even little things, like a visit now and again or a letter or a quick 10 minute phone call really lit up my day. I think it's important not to shut your friends and family out when you're doing it tough because you need all the support you can get. At the time you're like 'no I don't need this, go away I'm fine,' but it does help to have someone there to lean on when you're having a bad week.

You're an avid footy fan. What do you love about it? Did you play during your treatment? How was your first game after you'd been given the all clear?

It's the game itself that I love. The sense of anticipation right before the bounce of the ball at the beginning of a game. The tense feeling when the clock ticks up to 25 or 26 minutes and your team are up by one point. I love to ride every bump, groan and turnover, to cheer every mark, jump with every goal and scream at every poor decision. The atmosphere gives me so much: the noise outside the ground, everyone anticipating the game. That's what I love about it.

In the first year of treatment I didn't play a single game; second year I played about 5 and in the final year I think I only missed 2-3 games, so it was good how it turned out, but also kind of annoying because I missed those vital years of improving my basic skills. I think my first game back post-treatment was in year 7; I was so excited to be able to say that I was cancer-free. I didn't have to live by the excuse of being sick anymore and I could just get on with living a normal life and playing the sport that I love with no limitations.

You are about to embark on VCE. Any ideas what you want to do next / be?

If you'd asked me at the start of 2015 I would've said I've got no clue but I think these last few terms have really helped paint the picture. I'm thinking of doing a Bachelor of Arts at University of Melbourne, majoring in media and communications, as I'm really into writing and journalism at the moment. I'm really excited for the next few years ahead