

# HOW CANCER TAUGHT ME TO BE MORE RESILIENT

By Paul Coghlan

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 **Paul Coghlan**





## HI, I'M PAUL,

I live in the beautiful town of Westport on the west coast of Ireland with my daughter Ciana, partner Linda and her two daughters. I pride myself on being real, happy and authentic.

However 2018 changed my life dramatically and defined who I am as a person. Adversity that I could never have imagined suddenly landed at my doorstep.

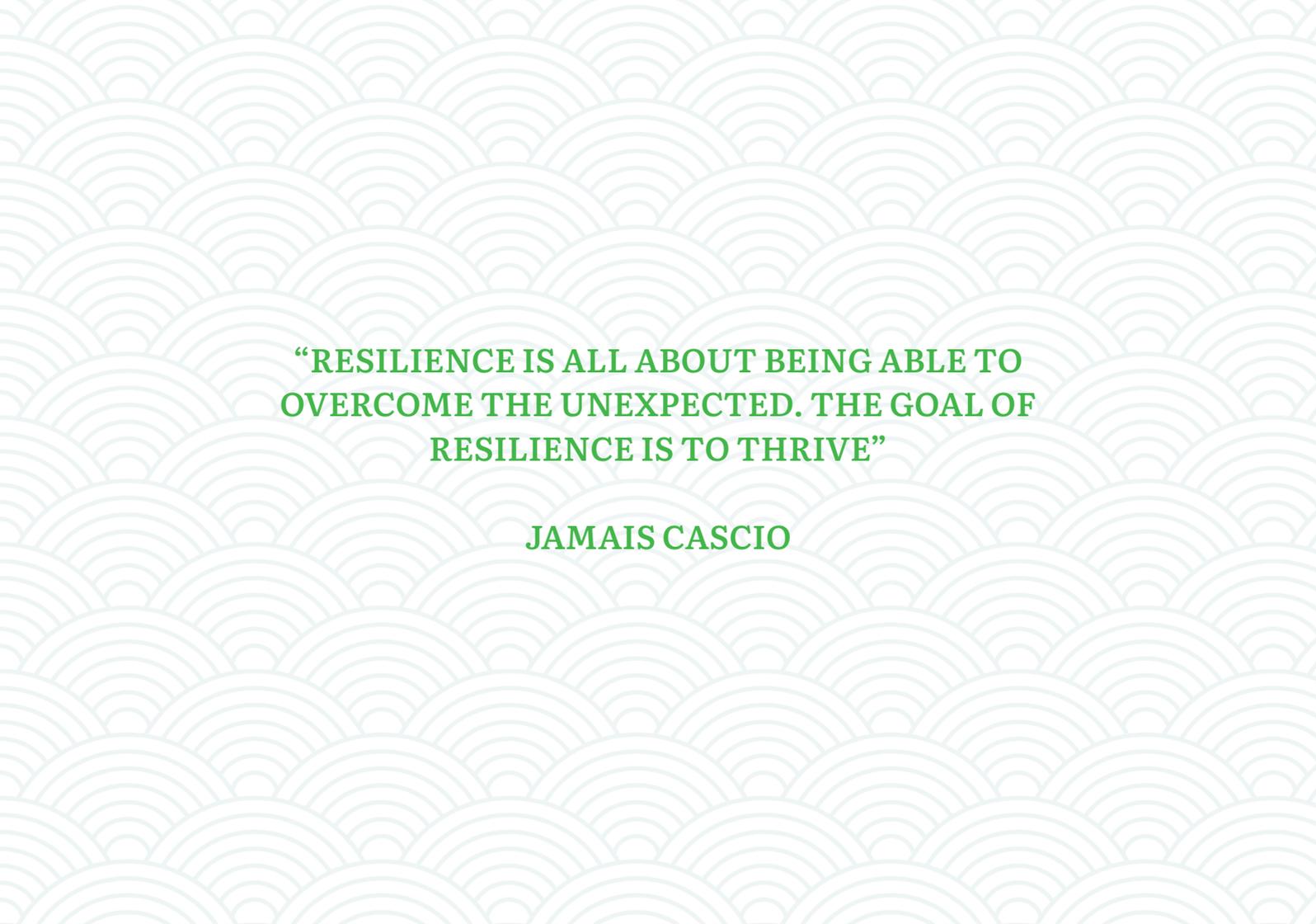
Thankfully, after 6 months on a hospital bed and a superb medical team I am now in remission from a rare blood cancer, Acute Myeloid Leukemia.

I plan to share with you my true and real life story and experiences. A journey that has brought me through not only a severe life threatening illness but my greatest ever challenges, physically mentally and emotionally.

I will share with you lessons that I have learned from cancer. I will show you some of the tools I used and continue to use that have helped me through the rollercoaster of events that have shaped my life and hopefully you can use in your daily lives. These events that have unearthed a character that I never knew existed.



I will forever remember being diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia and the devastation that diagnosis brought. Ironically, being at my fittest (both physically, mentally and emotionally) was to be more important than I could ever have imagined. Within hours of my diagnosis, I began to realise that the extremely aggressive treatment plan proposed was the only possible option to try to save my life and would challenge my entire being, body, mind and soul.



**“RESILIENCE IS ALL ABOUT BEING ABLE TO  
OVERCOME THE UNEXPECTED. THE GOAL OF  
RESILIENCE IS TO THRIVE”**

**JAMAIS CASCIO**

## THE PHYSICAL BATTLE

Within hours of my diagnosis, I began to realise that the extremely aggressive treatment plan proposed was the only possible option to try to save my life and would challenge every organ in my body.

23 sessions of chemotherapy over the coming 9 days would put an incredible strain on my heart, kidneys and liver. I was shocked to discover how important it was to have healthy organs and the impact any historical use of steroids or recreational drugs would have made to my survival rate. Previous use of any drug could have compromised the levels of chemotherapy my organs would have been able to sustain and if that was the case, the outcome could undoubtedly have been very different.

Many days of limited memories followed, as I was delirious from high fevers as a result of the leukemia and chemotherapy. I developed life threatening pneumonia, as my body struggled to eliminate the toxins from the breakdown of my blood and the strength and quantity of the chemotherapy drugs combined. Leukemia was doing its best to outrun the treatment, take over and take my life with it.

After this period came the realisation that my life had completely changed. Nothing can prepare you for how your lack of physical strength can impact your emotional and mental health. I needed help with literally everything. Changing my clothes became an exhausting chore. A shower needed an hour of preparation and assistance with washing and drying. I was unable to lift my arms above my head and looking downward caused dizziness that often brought a stumble and the occasional fall.

Three weeks after becoming a CANCER PATIENT I was hungry to see progress. I knew there was no quick fix for my very serious illness, but I also knew I could play a huge part in helping my body and mind to stay as strong as possible by being as active as I could.

I set myself a brave and ambitious goal of leaving my room and going for a walk every day. I would walk around the hospital ward that was to be my home for many more months into my future.

The first of many journeys consisted of walking 20 meters before complete exhaustion set in. The reality of how weak my body had rapidly become was very evident. Only weeks before this I trained 4 days a week with ease and I now struggled to walk a mere 20 meters.

The first of many goals had been set during my 6-month hospital stay. Many of my initial goals were something we all take for granted when we are well and healthy.

A short walk, a shower, a shave, to be able to concentrate enough to participate in a conversation for more than 2 minutes. These goals did not always have an immediate successful conclusion, but once I could see any progress, I always had the drive to continue.

I was aware of the importance of not pushing myself too hard while my body was fighting the impact of the leukemia and chemotherapy. But with each small achievement, I felt more and more proud of myself and became more and more determined to keep pushing myself to fulfill my hope of returning to a cancer free Paul Coghlan.

**“TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY.  
IT’S THE ONLY PLACE YOU  
HAVE TO LIVE.”**

**JIM ROHN**

## THE MENTAL WAR

While I pushed myself as hard as I could physically, the mental trauma of a cancer diagnosis was never too far from the surface. Every day I interacted with staff, fellow patients and the limited visitors that I was allowed to see (due to being so prone to infection) but my greatest challenges were during those periods when the hustle and bustle of day shift on the ward came to an end, and everything quietened down.

Evenings and nights were when my brain acknowledged the feelings of fear and doubt. The fear of fighting this powerful disease and the doubt that I would not have the strength to do so. I felt so much guilt about my daughter and the emotional impact my illness was having on her and I felt the guilt that a lot of ill people feel. The guilt of being a burden; to the hospital staff, my friends and my family.

To be honest, I almost gave up many times. But there was always a part of me that just couldn't throw in the towel. My daughter needed me. My family needed me. Linda needed me. And most importantly, I needed and wanted to live. I knew I had so much more to offer in so many different ways.

Multiple operations, hard hitting days of intensive chemotherapy, blood transfusions and neutropenia were all days that I knew I had to get through. I needed to adhere to all the infection controls and I needed bucket loads of patience.

Adversity changes a person. I am a man who has faced adversity and I have learned so much on my journey. I have learned about who and what is truly important in life. I have learnt that hope and determination can push you beyond what you ever believed you were capable of.

I have learnt that there is no growth without real feeling and I felt so many emotions so deeply, that it was not possible for me to emerge on the other side of this battle the same person that I was before my diagnosis.

Some days were filled with a deep feeling of loneliness and I found myself thinking "What If" and "I Wonder If" a lot. I wondered if my next blood test results were going to be positive or negative. I thought about what I would do if the results were bad and my health had deteriorated. I eventually realised that these thought

processes were unavoidable with the situation that I faced.

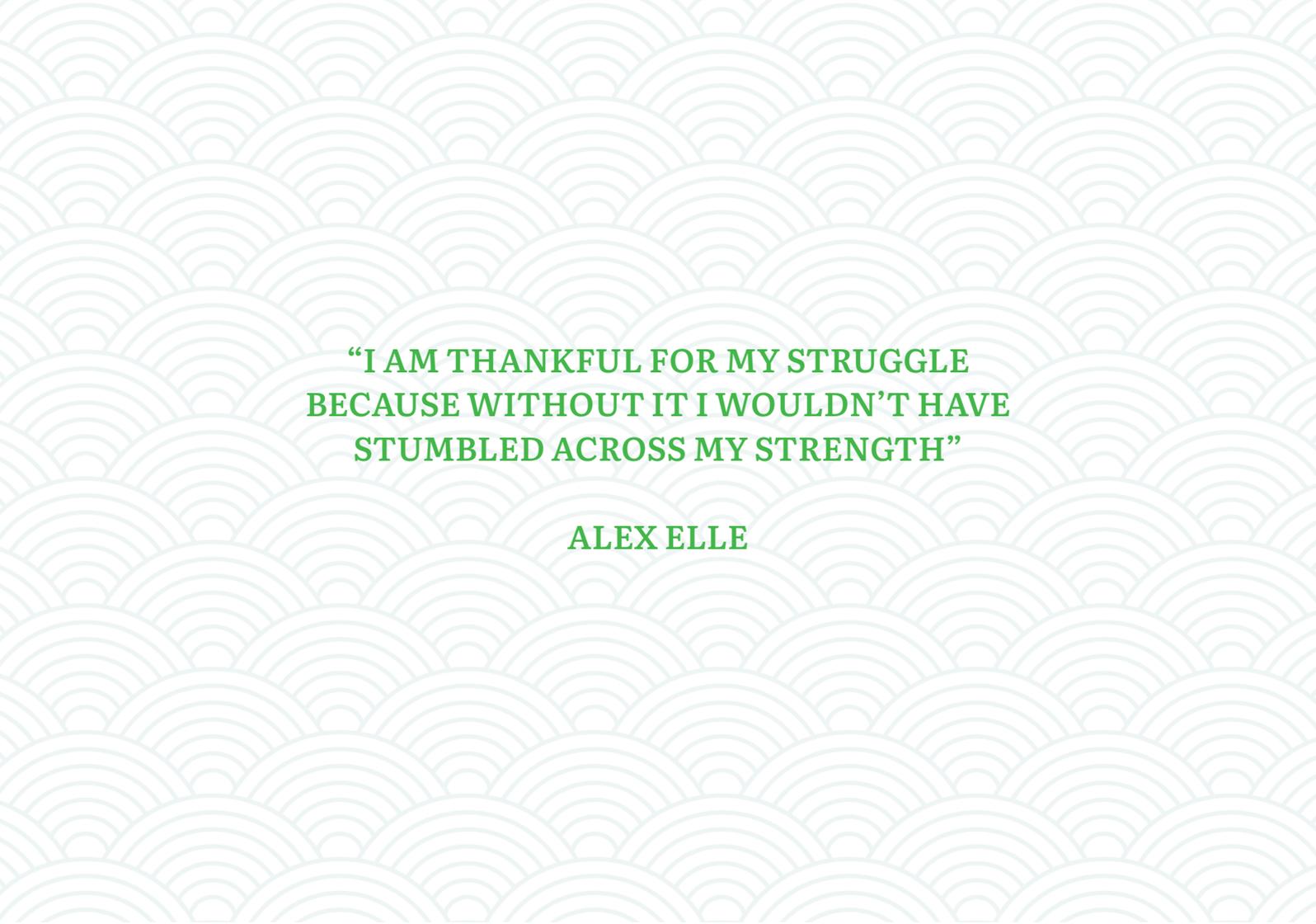
So many emotions had to be processed on a daily basis because my mind was constantly racing with so many different scenarios that were always prominent in my mind. Tears would often fill my eyes without any notice because of the fear and strain that the leukemia and chemotherapy were putting my body through. These daily challenges were draining, like a constant weight sitting on my shoulders. Dragging me down and doing their very best to bring me to a stop.

I couldn't let this get the better of me. I couldn't get swallowed up by these negative thoughts and feelings, because I feared that if I did, I would never find my way back. The more I won these fights against these negative thoughts and feelings, the more I started to believe in my own positive mental attitude.

I started to focus on goals and visualising my life when I was back to full health. I was becoming obsessed with getting better and rebuilding myself. My strengths of courage and positivity surfaced and took a firm hold. There was no way that I was going to give up at any setback. Every day I told myself "Keep going and you will succeed".

My mental resilience was severely challenged during my 6-month hospital stay. I started to isolate myself from my family and friends in order to protect them from the fallout of my cancer. Although my intentions were well meant, they did not serve me well as feelings of loneliness became prominent in my thoughts. I realised that by trying to protect others I was failing to protect myself. I learnt that being open and transparent with others was the only way I could move forward. This was a journey that I could not do alone.

**“WHEN FACED WITH ADVERSITY WE LEARN  
A GREAT DEAL ABOUT OURSELVES.”**



**“I AM THANKFUL FOR MY STRUGGLE  
BECAUSE WITHOUT IT I WOULDN’T HAVE  
STUMBLED ACROSS MY STRENGTH”**

**ALEX ELLE**

## THE EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

There is no doubt that the emotional trauma from my cancer diagnosis in 2018 will live with me for the rest of my life. I learnt life changing lessons in the most challenging circumstances and what I initially saw as weaknesses were actually inner strengths. I had to let all of the tears and fears flow as one, and begin to release all control emotionally from the ongoing challenges that I faced after being diagnosed with cancer.

Letting your emotions and memories slowly filter through all the negative, positive, happy and memorable emotional journeys that you have to go through will benefit you in promoting a clear and open mind. The fear of cancer spreading if you are mid treatment or returning post treatment is with you constantly and any similar symptoms bring an immediate sense of alarm.

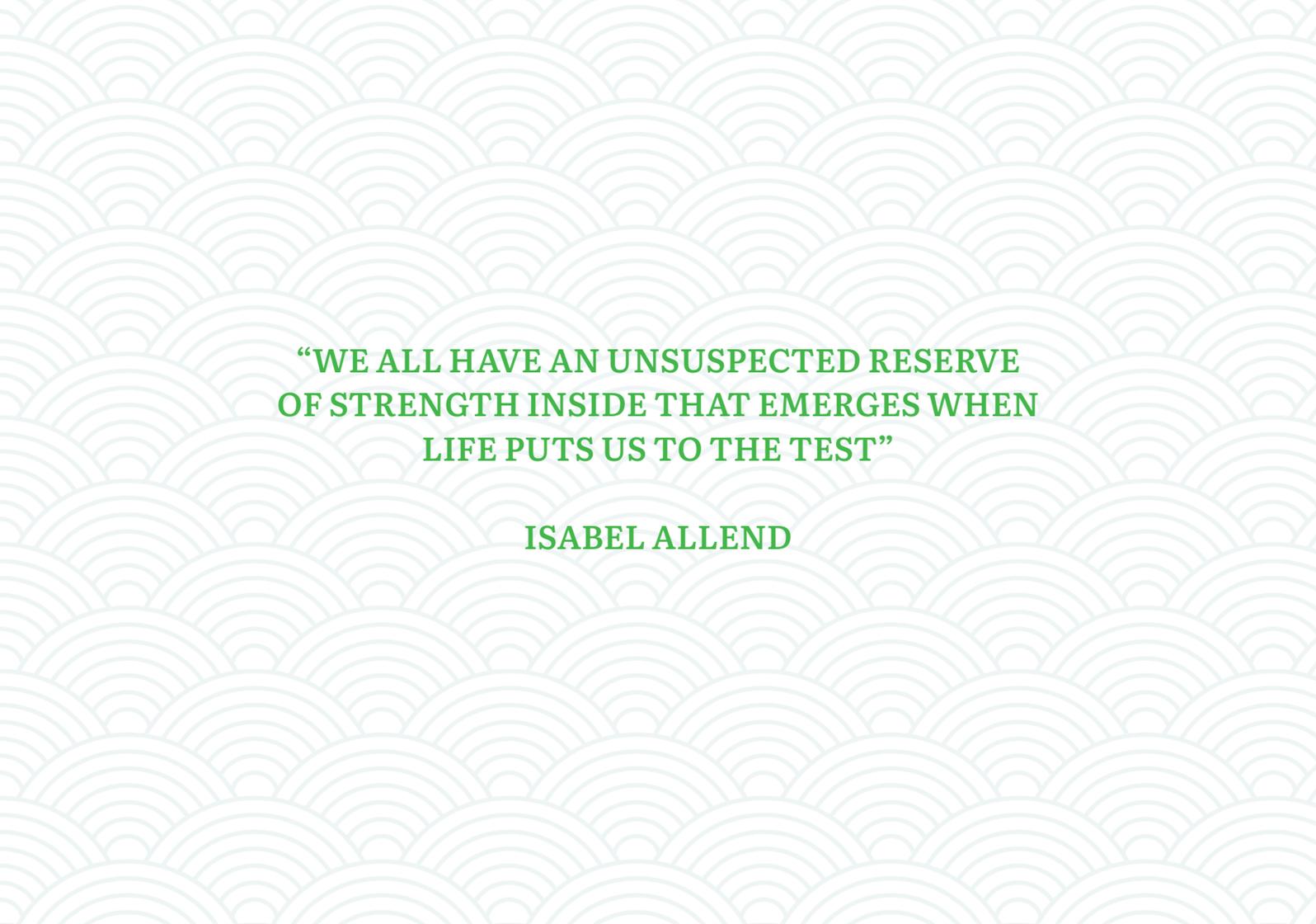
Some of the tools I used to help calm and quieten my mind were meditation and breathwork. They helped me to have a clear and open mind, which for me were key to making the right decisions to keep my life and mindset positive and healthy.

I struggled a lot and tried for periods during my illness to do it alone. Night after night I cried because the life I had created and the life I had planned had been taken away. My daughter Ciana's stable life and her time with me had been completely disrupted and I felt responsible and guilty for letting her down.

"You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think"

A.A Milne

I learnt that being vulnerable and being more open about my emotions was a strength. I also learnt that the having the right people in my support network helped to create a safe space for me to process and release my thoughts and feelings, but ultimately the responsibility to share my thoughts and feelings and be honest about what I needed was still mine.



**“WE ALL HAVE AN UNSUSPECTED RESERVE  
OF STRENGTH INSIDE THAT EMERGES WHEN  
LIFE PUTS US TO THE TEST”**

**ISABEL ALLEND**

## RESILIENCE

My struggles have made me stronger, more determined and more focused. There were many times that I felt beaten. But I truly believed in myself and that became the difference. My self-belief fueled my inner fire to succeed, even if that meant walking a few more steps every day.

We are all capable of pushing ourselves a little more physically, mentally and emotionally and we can create better versions of ourselves.

Real life does not always meet your expectations. It is during the times when life is toughest that you grow the most. Growth doesn't always come from educational learning. It can come from within you, if you are prepared to dig deep every time life knocks you down.

You can be in charge of your own growth and development. You can discover your true potential. Learn in as many different ways from as many opportunities as you possibly can.

That is how you can build yourself into a better, stronger version of who you are currently limiting yourself to be. The trauma of my diagnosis will always live with me and the fear of a return is always there, but leaning on people and receiving their support is one of life's greatest free gifts.

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