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as we are

we're facing health challenges with style & courage.

Claire's Style: Finding Balance after a Brain Tumor



CLAIRE

“After my surgery, I felt like I was climbing a mountain: I was almost at the top. However, when I reached the top, I learned that there was another summit to climb. I did not realize that I had the strength to keep on going and push forward when things got tough. Those lessons of perseverance have been very valuable.”



Claire and I met one year ago at a personal development retreat. We bonded through our mutual excitement in sharing the positive learning moments that resulted from our health challenges. Today, Claire runs a company called Synapse Consulting Inc. She enjoys walking in nature, writing in her journal, as well as spending time with her husband and 9 year old son.

Recently, Claire wrote a book that is set to launch in September 2015 called *Two Steps Forward: Embracing life with a brain tumor*. It is based on her journey that began five years ago.

In May 2010, Claire experienced an intense vertigo attack and migraine headache. After a CT scan, she was diagnosed with a rare benign brain tumor called a Colloid Cyst. Located in the third ventricle and centre of the brain, the tumor was monitored over time to ensure that it was not growing. For two years, Claire was able to “maintain her health” and continue working at her job in Marketing and Product Management.

Suddenly, in August 2012, Claire endured another vertigo attack. A migraine followed, which dwelled for more than 10 days in spite of medication adjustments. An eventual MRI showed that the tumor had grown. It was blocking the cerebrospinal fluid in her brain.



“Basically, if that happens, you can lose consciousness and die if it is not corrected. The only way to remove the blockage was to remove the tumor. By the time I went in for the procedure, my condition had deteriorated and I was in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit),” Claire explained.

Thankfully, the surgery went on without any major complications. However, Claire had a new life to adjust to. Not only was she beginning the physical post-brain-surgery recovery process and adapting to strong medications, but she was also navigating a spectrum of overwhelming emotions and posing big questions about her future.

“I was so grateful to be alive and have survived the surgery. At the same time, I was frustrated with my body because it was not the same. I was easily exhausted by my usual routine. I was carrying a lot of emotions in my mind about what had happened. I didn’t know how to deal with them all, so I started to write about my experiences in my journal. And that journal ultimately became a book about this whole five year journey.”



Whether readers have had their own health challenges or not, Claire shared that she hopes two key messages can be taken away:

- Take time to breathe in the small things: Claire is passionate about practicing gratitude and finding joy in simple, meaningful moments in life.

“We tend to forget how lucky we are to be able to do our daily activities until we suddenly cannot do them. I learned to become thankful for everyday things on such a granular level. I feel like I see colours brighter than I used to. It has been a beautiful lesson. Gratitude is something that we should be eternally happy for because our lives are so short.”

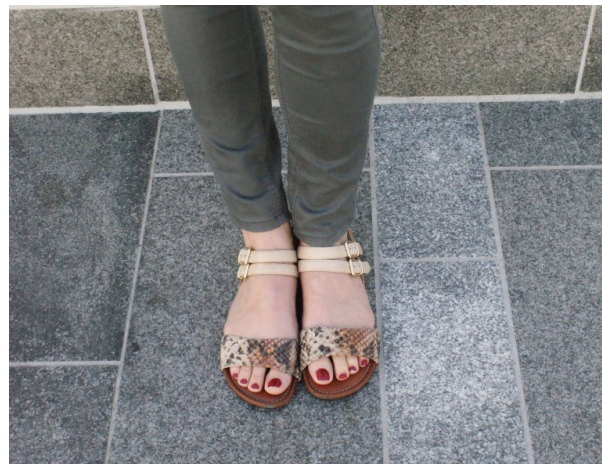
- Listen to your body and be your own advocate: Over the past few years, Claire has discovered the importance of standing up for herself when something has not felt right. While “it can be tiring sometimes” to have to return to the doctor’s office, she has learned to be kind to herself by seeking out the help she needs and asking for support from others.

When I asked Claire about her personal style, she shared that she only started making modifications to her clothing and accessories after her brain surgery.



Photos from 2012

“I had an endoscopic craniotomy, which is where a small piece of the skull is surgically removed to get to the brain. Very little of my hair was removed (though that was truthfully the last thing on my mind). My friends kindly bought me wonderful beanies because they thought I would not have hair after the surgery. When the seasons changed and the cool weather arrived, my head ached because my skull would feel very sore. I would sleep with a beanie on every night. Throughout that entire fall and winter (for six months after my surgery) I wore a beanie. It felt like wearing a warm blanket on my head! For two years after my surgery, I would rotate through four beanies when the temperature dropped in



Vancouver.”

Following Claire's surgery, her balance became challenged from a vestibular coordination perspective (eyes and ears). Wearing flat shoes was critical for her to feel stable and supported.

On her wrist, she wears a dazzling charm bracelet that was recently given to her as a birthday gift.

“Each pendent represents a particular part of my journey. The sunshine charm reminds me to be grateful for something every single day. The charm with leaves



on it is from my parents who have been an integral part of my life. This one here was chosen by my son and husband. The charm with little diamonds is from a group of close friends who have always supported me. Each time I add a charm to this bracelet, it reminds me of my life right now. My life is not driven by my journey, but it is *part* of my journey. I think my past has made me a better person...a more well-rounded person.”

Quick Questions with Claire

Was there a turning point for you after your surgery?

After my surgery, I was told to stay mobile by going for short walks. I would walk to the end of my street and back every day. One afternoon, nearly three months after my surgery, I was determined to walk along the Sea Wall, my favourite place in Vancouver. I put on my runners and told myself, “This is it, let’s go!” I walked for 5 minutes along the Sea Wall, and 5 minutes back, soaking in a beautiful ocean view and listening to the waves crash at the shore. I was elated. Tears of joy ran down my face because I had accomplished something really big...on my own...without help from anyone. I phoned my Mom right after to share the news, and she was so excited for me. It was one small thing that meant the world to me.



What has helped you along your journey emotionally?

Firstly, my husband was amazing throughout this journey and was my rock. My friends and family have also been immensely supportive. I also joined an online support group when I was first diagnosed with the brain tumor. That group has been invaluable to me. Even though friends and family were often looking out for my best intentions, it's only those who have walked in the same shoes that truly understand what it feels like when your body lets you down in this exact way. I also saw a psychologist, which was very beneficial for me. The stress and trauma of my surgery left my brain in a fight or flight mode. It really needed to come down to normal.

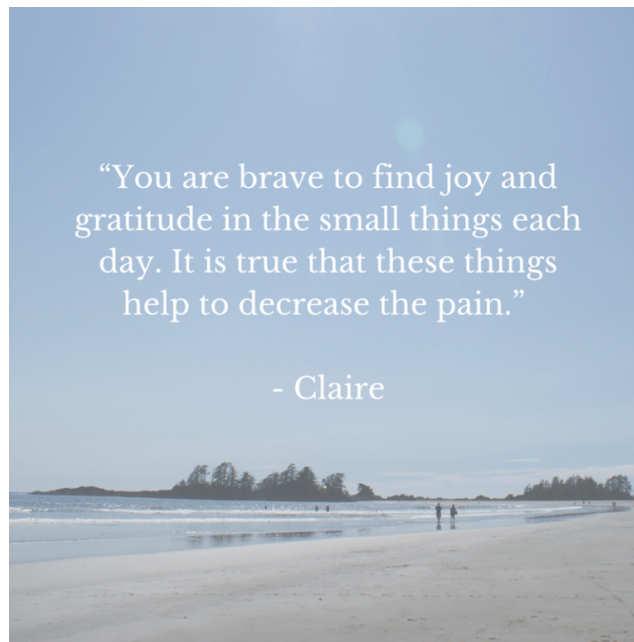
What advice would you give to someone else who is experiencing a similar health condition?



Make time your friend and not your enemy. Often, I was so keen to rush my recovery and get better quickly. But, my body was not ready to do that. Sometimes, with a health condition, your body is limited but perhaps your mind is not. Making time your friend allows you to move forward in small steps.

When I tried to push myself too hard, I would hit a brick wall. As soon as I had a good day, I would try to do the 10 things on my 'to-do' list. The next day, I would not be able to get out of bed. Then, I learned not to try and do *everything*. When you are feeling well, do a few things because you will feel better for longer and your body will get stronger.

While I compiled my interview pieces and photos for this feature, I remembered that Claire had written me a very sweet note at the retreat we met at. I felt that it beautifully captured her inspiring perspective:



I was once again impressed by the way that Claire articulates her journey with such grace, humility, and honesty. Her willingness to share her stories with me and the *As We Are* community was inspiring and uplifting.

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