

LIVE BRAVE

Chapter 3

Radical Reframe: Thinking Strategically and finding the silver lining

I've always loved a good strategy.

Even as a child, I didn't randomly do things: I planned them. Call me a control freak, but it worked for me. Even on a golf course, instead of swing-by-swing specifics, I was thinking about the "big picture," about why I was there and how lucky I was to be there.

This gift for strategizing has played a key role in my career trajectory. At Nike, I was a brand manager, then a global marketing director. Two years later, I would become the global head of brand strategy for the Rio Olympics. In other words: strategy was my bread and butter.

It's no surprise, then, that it took me approximately twenty-four hours to design a master strategy for survival. Cancer was like any other opponent, even if it felt scarier. Despite there being so many things you can't control, by sticking to a strong strategy, you can focus on the things you *can*.

Dr. Daniel Zegzula, my plastic surgeon, said something in our first appointment that I'll never forget: "You're going to have a tough year. But next year is going to be better—and cancer won't define you." I took that to heart.

Dr. Vuky, my oncologist, was the one who gave me a treatment plan, which will be familiar to anyone who's ever had cancer or any serious disease. The doctors draw up a plan and expect you to stick to it. Oftentimes, doing so can be the difference between life and death.

There's nothing wrong with a treatment plan, and I understand why everyone focuses on it—doctors, nurses, even well-meaning friends. After all, it's the medical blueprint that is supposed to get you from point A: "You have cancer," to point B: "You're cancer-free."

However, what I quickly realised was that whilst having a plan is crucial, it's not the be-all and end-all. A *plan* plays into the medicalization and victimisation of being a cancer patient, but a *strategy* gives you back the power. And on a journey that strips your power away on a weekly, daily, and hourly basis, devising and developing your own strategy for survival is a radical act.

My Cancer Strategy: Three Pillars

My strategy for my fight with cancer came to me quickly; I had it in place by day two. It revolved around three key principles:

1. Fight to win
2. Protect my daughters
3. Find humour in the darkness

Fighting to win involved taking the reins of my narrative, turning it from a tragic storyline into a battle saga. I wasn't a passive patient; I was a proactive fighter. It took constant re-framing to stay positive, but it was a mindset shift that I needed. I refused to be a passive victim.

Protecting my daughters was the principle that served as my emotional anchor. Everything I did, from my treatments to the way I transformed my lifestyle, was ultimately about showing my daughters the value of resilience, courage, and love. I would survive this—I had to—so that I could be their mother for years to come.

Finding humour in the darkness was my spiritual balm. I found that humour offered not only momentary relief but also made the hardest of days a bit more bearable. Doing

things like dressing up for chemo changed my relationship to pain and suffering. I had cancer, yet I found ways of having *fun*.

Why You Need a Strategy

Of course, having a treatment plan is vital. But having a *strategy* is also important. While a plan outlines the steps you need to take to fight cancer medically, a strategy is about choosing how you frame your journey—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Your strategy is your personal compass and helps you deal with the non-medical issues. It helps you navigate the sleepless nights, the identity crisis, the painful conversations, and the emotional cancer rollercoaster. In short, a strategy for your cancer journey is pivotal in taking control, allowing you to steer your experience in a direction that aligns with your personal values, strengths, and aspirations.

So, how do you do it? Here are some simple steps to follow as you design an empowering strategy for yourself:

1. **Define your core values.** At the heart of any strategy are core values. What matters most to you? Whether it's family, resilience, faith, or legacy, identify your non-negotiables. These are the values or goals that will serve as your emotional and psychological pillars.
2. **Set clear objectives.** Beyond medical outcomes, what do you want to achieve? It could be maintaining a positive mindset, maintaining "normalcy" in routine for example, or using the experience to inspire others. There's no wrong answer here. Your objectives are unique to you, and as long as they're authentic, they're right.
3. **Regularly evaluate:** Plans change, and so should your strategy. A strategy isn't one-size-fits-all or set in stone. What seemed vital at the beginning of your journey may seem less important later on. Your body can be going through big changes, but so is your brain, your heart, your soul. If you need to adapt your strategy, there's no shame in it. If anything, it's proof that you, too, are able to evolve.

4. **Keep it visible.** Write your strategy down and put it somewhere you can see it. Make it your screensaver or stick it onto your fridge. The more visible it is, the more ingrained it will become in your daily life.
5. **Involve loved ones.** Your strategy shouldn't be a well-kept secret. Include your loved ones, and let them know how they can help you follow your strategy.
6. **Assemble your team.** Beyond your medical team, identify the people you want on your personal support team. This could include family, friends, counsellors, or support groups. More on this later.
7. **Stay informed.** Knowledge is power. Understand your diagnosis, as well as treatment options and their potential side effects. This will allow you to make informed decisions and reduce anxiety stemming from the unknowns.
8. **Choose love over fear.** Sometimes you have to make a choice between love and fear. That choice was at the heart of my strategy. Am I making this decision based on love or fear? Every decision I made, every thought I had, every piece of feedback I was given—love was my North Star. Until that point in my life, I hadn't always been so good at loving myself. Could I create healthy boundaries and hold onto love on my cancer journey? Or would I give in to fear of outcomes that might not materialise?
9. **Cultivate a “fuck it” mentality.** This was fundamental, and it gave me the freedom to shrug off the fear. Being too cautious wasn't going to help me fight to win; I needed to develop a certain level of bravery and “just do it” -it being whatever I needed to do to get through the hour, the day, or the week.

Cancer is a life-threatening battle—and no one ever won a battle by charging onto the battlefield with zero strategy. What do warriors do? They fight to win.

The difficulty, however, was not my own determination but others' attempts to sabotage the fight. They didn't do it deliberately, but as you'll see in the following chapters the people who are supposed to be on your side can be more of a hindrance than a help.