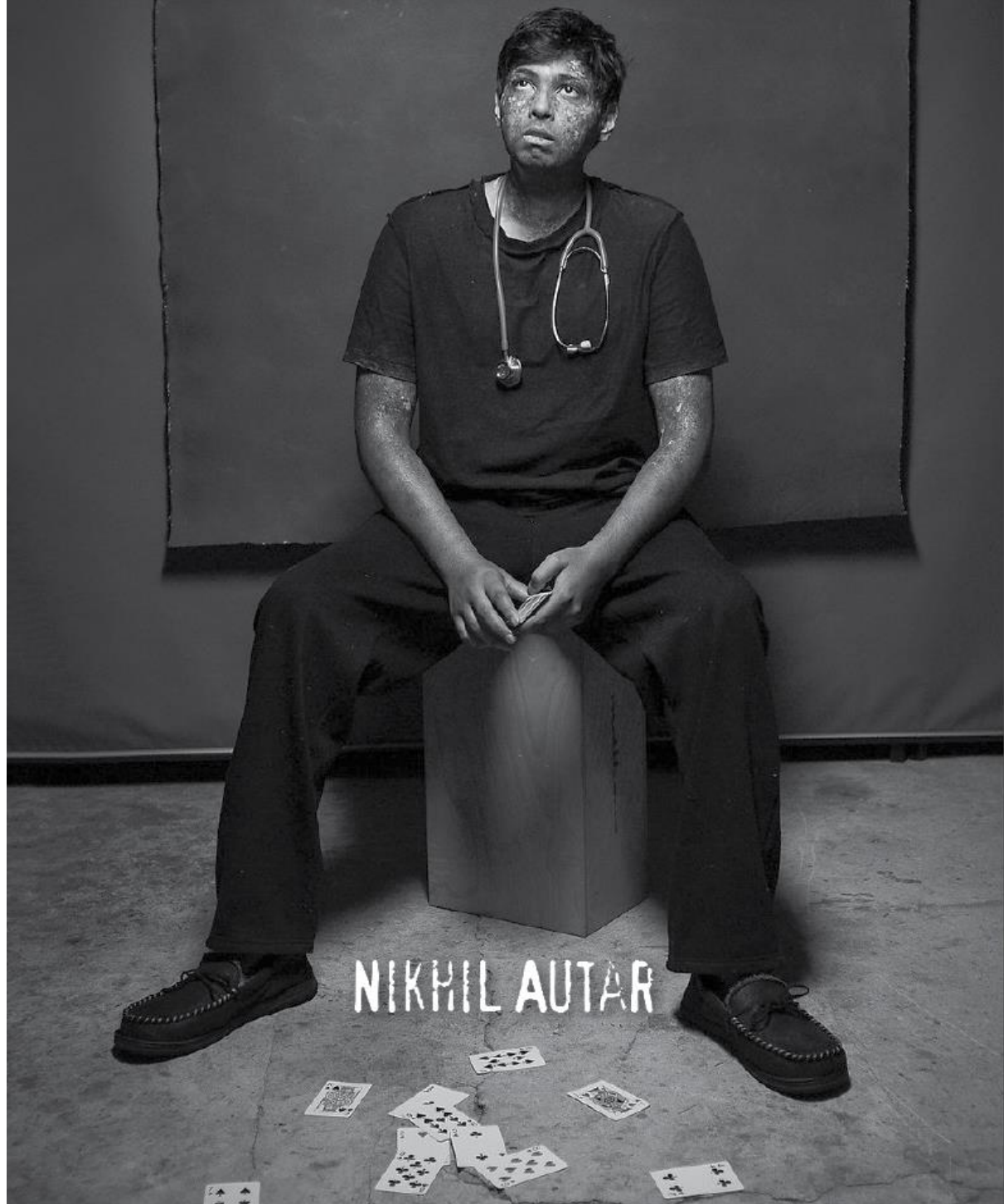


# HOW TO SUSTAIN MOTIVATION AND HACK POSITIVITY

Using the science behind motivation, positivity and neuroplasticity  
to become the happiest, healthiest, most successful you.



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# Foreward

My name is Nikhil Autar. I'm an ex cancer patient, medical student, cancer researcher, founder of Australian Student Startup of the Year, and also, amongst other things, a poker pro.

I was diagnosed at 17 with acute myeloid leukaemia, and given a 10-20% chance of surviving. But despite the pain and struggle, what kept me going - what kept me smiling, happy and kept me hopeful during treatment, wasn't the usual motivational drivel you hear when you are diagnosed with something... but rather a simple, logical process of looking at things. This ultimately made me realise that you'll ALWAYS have a second way of looking at things, and that taking that path was the only thing that made *sense*.

It isn't positivity, or optimism.

It's *REASONED* positivity. A process of constant Logical Reframing of a situation, to discern the best possible attitude, mentality and action to take.

By maintaining that over time, I hacked my own brain's processes of learning, memory and habit formation - its neuroplasticity - to ensure I ALWAYS processed things THROUGH this framework.

And because I DIDN'T do what most motivational speakers tell you too... Because I let myself be human... I didn't have to be Brave, spend huge amounts of Willpower I simply didn't have, or Courageous during ANY of this.

Because this is based on **REASON** and **LOGIC** – as opposed to just blind faith, or positivity, or some inherent “strength,” **ANYONE** can do this for **ANY** situation they find themselves in.

And here, I go into the science of how you can use this process to become the best version of you. The version of you that YOU wanna be. Whatever that is.

I talk about how I used this to smile during cancer, and stay happy despite tragedy after tragedy. I show you how you can do the same, if that's what you need.

But this mentality, and process, of always finding the most optimal path to take... The one that leads to you being the happiest and healthiest version of you, can also be used to optimise your response and give you the best chance of succeeding in life too.

I used it to lose over 20kg twice, while on the highest dose of steroids, by CHANGING the way I *thought* about food and exercise, rather than forcing myself through horrible diets and exercise regimes I couldn't maintain.

I used it to optimise my startup, and position ourselves for maximum success and impact. We're Australia's Student Startup of the Year, have won numerous grants, and were about to launch our first product, before I got into hospital. I know that once I'm out, we will generate at least 6 figures through early sales and marketing data we've collected.

I've talked about how pro athletes, and executives can use this process, and hack themselves, to enhance their performance and make being focused and productive, automatic. Their NORM.

I use it to remain objective, and make the best decisions when playing poker, something I started as a hobby, but have thus far profited something in the early 6 figures, in my spare time (I used this capital to fund my startup).

I use this to keep improving myself, no matter what.  
And I think you can use it for your challenges too.

This surgery I'm getting is gonna be tough. It's open heart surgery. It'll take months of recovery, and there's a chance that I'll have died on the table by the time you're reading this.

If I do... well... I won't be able to complain. I'm honestly not worried as I go into this. I'm using this mentality to calm myself now, as I write this. I know I'm in the best hands. What more can I do?

I just hope that this helps you, and that what I've done makes an impact in this world.

I've written this up in a way that you can benefit from what you seek most. I ensure that the science chapter isn't too sciencey or nerdy. That anyone can read it - and highly recommend you check that out. By understanding how this works, I think you give yourself the best chance of benefiting from it. You don't have to believe in me, because this is backed by objective, hard data and science. But my story could well help convince you it works.

I don't plan on charging for this book, unless a publisher ends up being the best way to get this to the most people. But if you want to help me out - only do it if you tell me how this has helped you. Send me an email, or find me on my social media profiles or YouTube (just google/search @NikhilAutar and you should find me - or check out [nikhilautar.com](http://nikhilautar.com) ).

I dunno how to do this - but I think paypal will work - [nautar1@gettosleepeasy.org](mailto:nautar1@gettosleepeasy.org) is my paypal (my business email). If I don't need it for treatments/other vital things, I'll be looking to invest it into medical research.

But yeah guys... I just hope this helps. If you share this via a referral like you can pick up at [www.NikhilAutar.com/mybooks](http://www.NikhilAutar.com/mybooks) - I'll donate \$1000 to a charity of someone's choice if 1000 people download the book.

Thanks. Enjoy. And let me know if it this helps you and what you think at [info@nikhlautar.com](mailto:info@nikhlautar.com)

Nikhil

PS – This is very much a draft. I've transitioned this from a bunch of research and 10,000 or so words into a full book in the week that preceded bypass surgery, so forgive me for any errors. Be assured that the final version, in the likely chance I will get to write it, will be fully referenced, Harvard/Vancouver style, and much more consistent and precise. The final chapters, I did have to rush. But still, I hope it's something that can help you out. I hope I get to finish it, and indeed, the app and everything else I wanted this to be – to help you guys be *sustainably* motivated, and to get the best weapon you can ever have on your side in life, there permanently. YOU.

CAroundYou.com #CenteredAroundYou  
NikhilAutar.com

If you're reading this over the next few days, check out my [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#), where I've scheduled a bunch of posts, from me to my family, you guys, and even, myself.

# Chapter 1 - My story.

The gentle swish of gum trees' leaves swaying into the breeze was all that could be heard, outside of the occasional grunt of a car engine, the squeals of delight of children playing in the distance, and my puppy, Bonzer's, steady pants.

I sat there, my fingers running through thick fur, lazy as the pine's motions through the air, languishing in the calm.

A storm was coming. I could feel it.

The past few months had been hell.

For the usual reasons of worry, and stress in my end-of-school pressure on driven Year 12 kids.

But also more...

It had been weeks since I'd gone to school now.

Weeks since I'd even mustered up the courage to flick through the mountains of notes that had gathered on my desk. This, from a guy who'd throw all-nighters months before university entrance exams.

A flash of anger seeped through me. All of that effort, for what?

Barely top-40 marks. The benchmark of my goal. The bare minimum required to get that enviable 99th percentile university admission score that would open up doors to my dreams.

All of that sacrifice, my genius plan of starting early and studying smart, not hard - for *this*?

The disappointment was always close to boiling up to the surface, dismay a mere instant from erupting through the calm façade of a teenager's awkward smile.

But ultimately, the thing I felt most, was disappointed.

Disappointed that my dreams were an instant away from withering away.

Disappointed that all that work was for naught.

Disappointed that I'd done all this, and given up at the end.

That's what I regretted most.

When I should have been finishing off the last few past papers, guaranteed to hold 5, maybe even 10 precious marks in repeat questions alone, I slept. Sometimes, for 16 hours a day, to avoid them.

When I should have been doing those last minute practice essays, I stalled by looking into my plate for hours, to the point where I'd be sickened by the thought of taking another bite.

In the hours before the exam, the precious moments where my peers were scrambling about for every scrap of knowledge, I stood there, blank faced. Not caring.

And now, despite my marks being salvageable, I couldn't muster up the energy to even read through the new modules in science, the latest chapters in math, the next essay in English, yet alone excel at them.

And tbloody cold wasn't helping either.

Who gets sick for 6 weeks in the middle of finals?

Me of course.

This all sucked.  
I needed to get up and work.

I grimaced as I shifted up the pool chair, the protesting groans of the now years-old hinges a piercing cry in the otherwise still air. Bonzer sighed next to me as I swung my legs around and made to get up. It was a good moment. It was nice to get away. But that's all it was meant to be. A moment.

But as soon as I heard that phone ring, I regretted moving.

*I wished that moment could have lasted forever.*

Too soon, I heard the click of the phone being put down, and the creak of the shutter door being pried open.

Dad's head stuck out over the pool, and even as he said it, I knew something was very wrong.

"Nikhil, your blood tests came back. The doctor said we have to go to the emergency room. "

"Now."

The ride through the twisted streets of Liverpool seemed to pass in moments. Before I knew it, I was ushered out of the door, and into the chaos of a Monday afternoon ED. I was checked in and held there. People on the verge of collapse were waiting patiently outside, while I was seen first. Even 17 year old, barely medically-literate, me knew something was up.

Nurses hurried by. I answered the questions asked of me, barely noticing my own voice above the deafening noise of my heart pounding as if it had just been told how many beats it had left.

Dad and I were left alone for a few minutes. In the distance, I heard the concern and urgency in the doctors' and nurses' voices. It felt as if it was all for me.

A few things jumped out at me.

My gratefulness for the old nurse's kind smile, and her insistence that she give me the numbing crème before an injection.

The concern as these actions, at odds to/against the grain of the usually dismissive, uncaring ED, become more and more suspicious - it was all too conspicuously inconsistent to the norms of the dismissive, chaotic EDs I'd seen on TV.

The whispers of someone saying, "but he's only 17," in the distance, echoed in my mind endlessly.

When the nurse wasn't looking, I snuck a furtive glance at my files behind which they seemed to take great effort in hiding, as they came in to record my vitals.

A phrase leapt out at me towards the bottom of the thoroughly scribbled on page.

"Bone marrow failure," I murmured.

“Wait... Does that mean leukaemia?” I asked Dad, tentatively. Vague memories of the story of ‘1000 paper cranes,’ the tale of a girl who’d fallen ill after the bombings of Hiroshima, pieced themselves together in my brain.

He looked at me dead in the eye, as memories of an uncle who’d had something similar 10 years back came flashing through both his and my mind, and pronounced, “No.”

-----

The whole of tomorrow, I laid in bed, clutching my aching back in one arm, my sobbing mother in the other, hoping against hope that the marrow they’d taken from my hip came back with anything but that callous, clinical word.

Eventually though, a man I’d never seen before entered my room, his associates in stead, sighed, and said,

“Nikhil, the good news is you’re 17 and you have leukaemia... But the bad news is... You’re 17 and you have leukaemia.”

----

I cried.

For ages.

The cliched feelings of devastation, shock, confusion, and fear were no less apt in describing my state.

Confusion reigned supreme in the moment, giving way to anger in the next. But between these, interspersed constantly under the surface, was insurmountable devastation.

Everyone around me was either in their own void or trying to lift me out of my own.

“Nikhil, you’re strong.”

“You’re brave.”



“You’ll get through this!”

But no matter what they said, the hollow tones of a voice echoing, “10 to 20%,” rattled on in my mind.

I was 17... and told I probably wouldn’t live to see 21. *What did they know what I was going through?*

I tried pulling myself out of it. In moments of clarity through the haze of tears and fear, I tried revving myself up. I watched Kobe Bryant basketball highlights, in the hope his sheer will and determination would pull me up. That soon melded into watching, remembering - being told by family and friends of these amazing individuals who’d climbed mountains without oxygen, who’d had limbs cut off, yet still completed triathlons, who’d surmounted inexorable odds and lived, no, *Thrived* despite that.

But though they’d hold me up, give me something to smile about, for a few minutes... The same thoughts would spring up again, and pull me back down.

After a while of having those stories thrust upon me, a cacophony of tales told by well meaning, but distraught friends and family, I’d had enough. So what if some girl who’d suffered burns just ran a marathon? A yogi could control their digestion through the power of their mind?

Who cares?

At that time, all I could see was pain, suffering and imminent death in my future.

Irrelevant tales of triumph didn’t erase that reality. Their encouragement to “just be positive,” to “be strong,” “brave,” to “not give in” couldn’t hold a candle up to my reality.

**I WAS 17, AND TOLD I PROBABLY WOULDN’T LIVE TO SEE 21.**

How did *ANY* of that help me?

It’s not like I wasn’t trying to find something to feel better about.

I pondered their circumstances, looked at these 'inspirations,' and asked myself, what could I do? What *should* I do?

No-one had an answer. No-one gave me a path to follow.

But after crying for days, feeling desolate, frustrated and afraid - I needed to do something.

I hated that feeling. The wet pillows. The sweat as I anticipated what was to come. The omnipresent feeling of eternal doom. I wanted to break free from that. But I couldn't see past those words... '10 - 20% that you'll be alive in five years.'

I felt like I'd done everything. I fell asleep, hoping this was all some bad dream, or a terrible joke, each night. I tried digging through others' stories of triumph, looking for something I could cling to. I begged God for some sort of guidance.

But in the end... it turned out that a simple little thought experiment would be what got me out of that feeling for the first time.

What got me out of that mess was this.

What I did was I took a step back. And pretended that what had happened to me had happened to someone else.

When I did that, for the first time, the emotions - constant fear, dread and despair - they all dropped away. And from that objective position of control, I was finally able to contemplate what had happened, and question what I was doing, and what it was accomplishing.

From there... I was free. I could see things more clearly. With calmness and reason.

And it was from there that I realised that no matter how much it sucked... *I couldn't change the fact that I had cancer now*. No amount of begging, pleading, prayer or willpower could change that.

So why was I torturing myself with all these thoughts and feelings?

After seeing, and accepting that I had this now, I realised that all the fear and depression was coming from me.

MY brain. MY mind.

No-one could come into my head and force me to feel those things, right?

What was it accomplishing then? Other than making me feel worse about everything?  
Possibly making my chances of survival even slimmer than it already was?

Nothing.

So why was I doing that to myself?

I had no answer...  
From that step back... it didn't make any sense.

Sure, feeling bad for myself was something I couldn't help. We're only human. When we get told something momentous such as this, we can't help but feel horrible about it all.

This didn't happen right after I took that step back either. I walked through many scenarios, pretended to be in many people's shoes - even looked through forums of people who actually HAD gone through cancer (as opposed to motivational influencers) before I broke things down to the basic, fundamental assumption my brain had made for me. That feeling bad was what I should be doing right now.

And now that I had asked myself, "Why was I feeling so bad? What was it accomplishing?" I could finally start producing answers to the next thought... "What *should* I do instead?"

An answer to that wasn't apparent right away. My slim odds, the fear of imminent pain, and my angst at being diagnosed so young, kept erupting uncontrollably in my mind.

So I decided to do the same thing I did with this shitty piece of news, to my doubts and fears.

**I took a step back... and I questioned them. Until I saw a second, better way of looking at things.**

**So chemo was starting in 2 days' time.**

But why was I, why does everyone, just look at it as just something that brought pain, and misery? I mean, wasn't it also a medicine? The very thing that could get me out of this?

Why not look at it for what it could do, rather than focus on what came with it? Of all the ways of looking at it, wasn't *that* the one that would leave me happiest and healthiest?

**My chances... they were slim.**

But wasn't it also just that? *A chance?* An opportunity to pull myself back up. A shot at a second life, and normalcy. Ruminating over the odds... if anything... only made them slimmer. Feeling doomed would only make me more likely to end up that way. The placebo effect is a thing, right? Why not focus on THIS instead?

**And in the end, they wouldn't be doing this to me if they didn't think it could work, right?**

And it was on the back of that thought, that my doctor's words came back into my mind.

So I got cancer young. I was unlucky. Cursed, you could argue.

But didn't that also mean I could get the hardest treatments possible, and get back up, faster?

I didn't have any comorbidities that would make treatment worse.

I didn't have a family to look after and worry about... on the contrary, I had one behind me. I had friends, these amazing nurses, and one of the best medical systems in the world behind me.

**Maybe the bad news was, I was 17 and I had cancer...**

**But the good news was... *I was seventeen when I had cancer!***

It may seem superfluous. It didn't change anything, objectively. What was to come, would come.

But to ME, it was everything.

**YOU WILL ALWAYS - ALWAYS - HAVE A SECOND WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS.**

This process, of taking a step back, questioning my doubts and fears, and asking myself what I should do, gave me back something I'd lost. Control... Of the one thing that really mattered.

ME.

It made me see that *I had a choice* in how I viewed things.

And when I took a step back from that... making the decision to focus on the perspective, to walk the path that led to me being happiest and healthiest, didn't take courage, bravery or strength - something I'd tried and tried to bring myself to emulate through all those "positive," "motivational" "heroes" that were thrown in my face at the time -

It became the only *logical* thing to do.

The only thing that made sense.

To be honest... because I'd taken a step back and looked at things *objectively*, and with *reason*, it actually became *EASY* to follow. .

**ONCE YOU SEE THAT BETTER PATH TO TAKE FORWARDS, IT ONLY MAKES SENSE TO TAKE IT.**

And following it, and doing it in this way, it was only a matter of TIME  
That would lead me to become someone who could, and would always do this.

For ANY challenge I faced.

Cancer was almost easy, once I saw this.

And the more and more I did this with more and more obstacles going forwards, the easier it became to find that second, better way to look at things.

But in truth, things will never be as easy as they seem. There was still pain and suffering to come.

And the words of one of my nurses, the night before chemo, at first, shocked me.

Where everyone was assuring me that I could do it... that it wasn't so bad... that I'd get past this in time... this lady came up to me and said,

"Nikhil... chemo is going to be worse than the worst thing you've ever had. You're going to be vomiting your guts out. You're gonna be going to the toilet 10 times a day. Your gut will ache like it's never ached before, and you may feel so sick you'll want it all to end. Prepare yourself."

At first, I was shocked.

*"Why the hell would you say that to me, now?"* I screamed in my head, as I nodded politely, watching my parents recompose their own shocked faces.

But later that night, I pondered that too.

I was in this euphoric state of unbridled positivity, after realising I had so much on my side.

But when I took a step back, and thought about Nurse May's words... I realised that this too was something I had to acknowledge.

The path going forwards wasn't going to be clear and uneventful. The chances of that being the case were slim. But as the fear and despair threatened to seep back into my forethoughts... I took a step back, and asked myself *why* she'd told me that.

It seemed cruel, crass and abrupt at first. But it was no less true.

These obstacles and hurdles were gonna be there anyways. I had a choice.

I could either linger on the pain and suffering, pretend, or hope that it wasn't going to come, or else, I could *prepare* for when it did, and ask myself now, rather than when I'd be clutching my knees to my chest in agony, what I should be focusing on to help pull myself out of this.

*Acknowledging* my suffering, and the obstacles in my journey didn't mean they'd have power over me.

No, by *accepting* truths that couldn't be avoided anyways, I'd give myself the opportunity to prepare myself. A higher chance of bouncing back up after I'd get knocked back down. And I'd also get more satisfaction when I ultimately did so...

Because I'd *show myself that I could* still smile, no matter what my circumstance. Every time I did, I'd build up my own belief in myself that I could. I didn't have to look forward to the pain and fear. I'm not crazy. I knew I wasn't gonna enjoy it.

But I knew that when it did come - I'd focus on what all of this was doing for me. *They wouldn't be doing this to me if they didn't think it could help.* The struggle we go through doesn't happen for a reason. But we can always change how we look at it to get ourselves through it, and take pleasure from keeping that spark of hope alive, and bouncing back up, after it's passed.

It was the planning that came before this, the acknowledgement that this was going to be hard at times, but also me allowing myself *to feel bad and crap* about it all that ensured I maintained this mindset.

If I'd "just been positive." If I'd forced myself to "be strong," and "think past the pain and suffering" that the cocktail of poisons pumping through my veins would bring... each time I couldn't do so, I'd lose faith... In myself. I'd start to doubt my ability to *resist* or *be strong*. I'd lose faith in the treatment itself. Each of the numerous times that something would come to knock me off my perch, I'd be forced to balance precipitously on that thin pilon of strength and courage by forcing myself to feel something I couldn't.

On the other hand, by *LETTING MYSELF BE HUMAN* and acknowledging the challenges that would come, and telling myself that I couldn't expect myself to be this "Happy, yolo, optimist" right away... By telling myself that I *WOULD* fail every now and then, but that in the long run, I *COULD* get to this point, where I *WOULD* pull myself back up, ensured that I would.'

By letting myself human, I made myself more likely to learn, and rise after failure. By acknowledging that it'd take time... I gave myself no way to fail.

Because i knew i'd fall every now and then... I also knew what I needed to tell myself to get back up, keep going, or at the very least - I knew that after the pain and misery ended, I'd pick myself up.

Because I was looking at things in the long run, I'd only have to do this twice in a row, and focus on those times I did do it, to assure myself I could do it.

Because I had a system - this 2 step process of taking a step back, and breaking all my problems down into bite sized pieces until I saw the best path to take going forwards, I'd be able to overcome any *new* challenges that inevitably come in life.

The outcome didn't matter. I'd even prepared myself for the worst. If the doctor came in one day telling me I only had 3 months left, I knew I could (and probably would, for a while at least - we're only human after all) wallow in the misery of it all... feel cursed. And depressed. But I knew that eventually... I'd get to a point where I could tell myself... that I had 3 months left...

To *LIVE*.

To savour every moment possible with my family and friends. To linger in the feel of cool water slaking my throat. To smile, and laugh. And enjoy every single second of every single moment I had left.

I actually was told palliative care might be the best option at one stage during treatment... And when I was, I found myself doing this.

But I also told myself that I'd do everything I could to improve my chances. That I wouldn't resign myself unless I absolutely had to.

And I did. In fact, I found and advocated for the drug that's probably why I'm still here. But that's a whole other story.



In the end, no matter what, by doing this, I ensured that I'd give myself the best chance of being happy and healthy by doing this. I'd planned for, and knew, over time, I'd get better and better at adapting to the hard months that were to come. I knew I could get myself through this, no matter what came up.

But by using this mindset, of taking a step back, walking through all my options, picking the one that left me happiest and healthiest - I've also used this mindset to get through so much more. To get through problems. To make myself someone who *AUTOMATICALLY* looks at what I can do, rather than focus on things I can't.

When I relapsed, and was told I had less than a 10% chance of surviving, that palliative care might be my best option, I found something to smile about 10 minutes later. That this wasn't over, that I had a year of medical school knowledge at that time, to find help. But even if it was... that I could still choose to focus on the things that made me happy.

As I sat in the car, going to hospital, seeing flashing lights that had blinded my left eye, I'd automatically be telling myself that whatever happened, as long as I could think, I'd still be able to enjoy some aspects of life, as many many people in this world do.

As I sat in hospital, getting told I had a third cancer, my mind was already telling me to not panic - that nothing was confirmed yet - but that either way, I had a fighting chance. And that I could, at the very least, still choose to focus on what I could do, and what I did have, no matter what.

And as I sit down in my bed, typing this up, before open heart surgery - a surgery I'd only find out I'd need only a few days before going in - I'm already telling myself that though there are risks to this thing... surgeons are great. And though pain would come... it wasn't happening now, and that I wouldn't remember it afterwards. Why make it any worse than it needed to be? I am still human, after all, I can't help but be afraid. Why not put that angst towards something useful? Like finally writing this book.

I surprise myself sometimes by how calm I've been during this. But again... I honestly think anyone can do this for anything they're going through because in truth - it's so simple to do.

When I find myself facing a new challenge, all I do is:

1. Take a step back, and look at what had happened to me objectively, as if it had happened to someone else.
2. From that step back, I'd question all the doubts, fears and obstacles in my paths, and broke them all down into manageable pieces that I could deal with.

3. I'd look at all my options, through all perspectives (or look for ones people used in similar situations) and pick the path that led me to the happiest and healthiest version of myself.

And

4. I told myself it'd take time. I gave myself a long term goal of becoming someone who could find that second way of looking at things to heart.

5. I let myself be human. I didn't have to do it all the time. I could let myself fail, and be human in the process. As long as I kept my sights on being able to pull myself back up... I knew that I'd get there.

I didn't wanna just be told to "JUST DO IT" or be "pumped up" for a few moments and hope I'd stay that way.

That last step in particular, by letting myself be human, and preparing to fall, or preparing for failure - not languishing in it, but rather looking to learn from it - I KNEW that I'd get to a point where I could become a better version of me.

It's not "positivity". It's not even hope. By giving myself a process *to always find something to be positive about*, I take out the guesswork and know I'll succeed. It's based on logic, so even those who feel cursed, and helpless, will be able, and willing to grasp it.

**It's *reasoned* positivity.**

It's not "motivation". Motivational media often fails people who need it most, if it's not for them, or else gives people fleeting moments of drive when what they really need to succeed is something lasting, that ensures they succeed.

**It's *sustainable* motivation.**

This is not a "winning mentality". It's a process where you'll always be able to pull yourself up. Where you constantly self optimise, and question your thought processes, your actions and plan for your future, so that you always taking the path that leads to the highest chance of success.

**It's a *winning* process.**

And the best thing about it... is that **it's something ANYONE can do. For ANYTHING too.**

I've already told you how this process, because it relies on logic and reason, and because YOU create this YOURSELF, means it doesn't require some innate trait of bravery, or courage to do.

And because these basic principles are backed by science, you don't *need* to believe in anything or anyone too.

I'm not writing this to pump you up. I don't want you to believe I'm some super being, because no-one is. I'm writing this you that YOU can pump YOURSELF up - and make yourself THE BEST VERSION OF YOU.

Similar to how Intrinsic motivation, a desire to do something because you'll be pleasing YOU, [is shown to create more sustainable outcomes than external ones](#) - ones that require you to do something to earn a reward, when you do something because you believe in it, you're much more likely to benefit from it.

The end goal isn't necessarily an accomplishment or trophy. It's you becoming a better version of yourself which results in *more* accomplishments and trophies.

Self distancing, the act of actively taking yourself away from scenarios and reflecting, leads to lowered firing in the emotional, limbic centres of the brain, and increased firing in the logical frontal cortex. This means that just by making yourself taking a step back, you not only halt emotions, you think more logically *automatically*.

### **Taking a step back makes you physiologically more likely to think smart.**

Neuroplasticity is the basic concept that underlies memory formation and learning. When neurons fire together, they wire together, and create stronger and stronger cortical maps that relate to mental thought processes (more consistent approaches to solving challenges) just as much as physical ones (gradually improved performance as you master a skill in a sport).

Because you're using that process of taking a step back, and reminding yourself why the path you're taking is the best one, you don't need willpower to keep walking.

It takes around 6 weeks to form a new habit through this, and good habits are just as hard to break as bad ones. Hell, at 6 weeks - your new thought process becomes automatic - your norm. Meaning it won't even require willpower.

Long term potentiation, the strengthening of synaptic transmissions in your brain that are those thought processes, grows the moment you start thinking with a new thought process -

meaning after your first few attempts to walk down that path that leads you to a better version of you, the easier it becomes to keep walking it.

**Taking a step back and reminding yourself why you're going where you're going makes getting there easy.**

And finally, by giving yourself a long term goal, you rig your brain to release more and more dopamine - the reward neurotransmitter - the closer and closer you get to your target. Dopamine is literally responsible for the reward pathway of addiction. If you focus on achieving something, the closer you get to it, the more satisfying it is.

**Thinking long term makes you obsessed with constantly improving.**

Neuroplasticity and giving yourself this long term goal compliment each other. As you get better at being the better you, the more happiness you get, the easier it becomes to keep walking down that path.

But when you doubt yourself, or feel that your end goal, the ideal you, is still so far away, neuroplasticity ensures that getting back on track is easier. If you get to that 6 week point, you no longer have to think about it.

Letting yourself be human along the way doesn't only minimise the pain that comes from forcing yourself to do something you hate, when you're taking a step back, and walking yourself through *WHY* you're doing all this through this process, it leads to you learning from your failures, and indeed, ensures you improve how you look at the world as you go.

**Being human makes you more likely to succeed**

This process creates a positive feedback loop that ensures you get absorbed with achieving your end goal. By positive feedback loop, I mean a process that keeps activating, and hence, repeating itself, as opposed to what some hipster wannabe yogi would interpret it as in your regular self-help book.

Many talk about positivity being proven to be effective by the placebo effect.

The placebo effect is not well understood, but is very damn real.

The placebo effect, it's important note, is real. But placebo *treatments*, ones that don't actually have an impact, don't show an obvious placebo effect. They [are not so successful](#).

Just as blind positivity or hoping to the universe (despite what people who hold things like “The Secret” on a pedestal) won’t work to improve your outcomes compared to what I talk about... Reasoned positivity, or #ReasonedOptimism, which will allow you to gain maximum placebo effect benefit, not only because you actually receive an effective intervention (whether that be taking STEPS towards making content that makes your business more likely to go viral, or reading about negotiation habits and psychology, as opposed to hoping things go well), but also because you have a reason to believe it works.

[A personality trait of absorption](#) - someone who becomes completely absorbed by their mental imagery, or beliefs, is one that’s most associated with people who benefit from a placebo effect. Personality traits need not be innate - [you don’t have to inherit them](#) (this is one of the largest debates in psychology, but hopefully the above has shown you that you CAN change how you look at things). This means that you *can* become someone who *does* benefit from believing you’re doing what you need to do to get better.

While this process may not change an outcome, contrary to what people who read “The Secret” once start screaming (the Secret essentially says something to the tune of “positivity” creating “great vibes” that leads to the universe being your bitch), what this *process* does is *ensure* you give yourself the highest chance of physiologically benefiting from self-belief.

Positivity alone can do that, if you’re doing the right things.

But giving yourself something to be positive about *ENSURES* you *WILL* do it. The science behind HOW that process that got me through cancer can help you do this, I’ll explain in chapter 3.

But this thought process, of taking a step back, questioning all your doubts and fears until you see the best option going forwards, isn’t limited to getting yourself through tragedies. It can be used for ANY challenge you face too.

That process, if you use it enough times, becomes a habit. An obsession. Your automatic way of thinking is to find and follow that path that leads you to the most success. Science, and neuroplasticity ensures that It doesn’t require willpower, or even thinking through things. You’ll find yourself improving your outlook, your outcomes and YOURSELF by doing this.

And just as I’d used this to get past tragedy after tragedy, I’d also used this to take that path that leads me to the happiest, healthiest, and most successful version of myself.

I used this to **overcome social anxiety and become happier with myself.**

After losing a lot of my old self, including my looks to cancer, I realised that was causing me to be sad. But when I took a step back and thought about it, I realised that I, and pretty much everyone else in this world, spends so much time and effort focusing on the opinions of other

people. Why was I, was does everyone, stop themselves from being happy because of what others are *thinking* about them, when (a) most people aren't thinking anything bad of you at all and (b) even if they were, why kill yourself for someone you don't even like. Someone you wouldn't wanna be friends with?

I used this to **choose the most optimal pathway for my startup in the long run.**

My company, [Get to Sleep Easy](#), powered by my machine learning powered app, [Centered Around You](#), is creating medical devices that bridge the gap between home and healthcare. After losing 2 friends to a fall and preventable infection within a week, I needed to make change, and figured a hospital bed which could prevent the most common, preventable diseases and monitor patients remotely would be the best way to go about it. But after taking a step back, and a few months of product development, I realised I needed to reevaluate our product and our customer. Instead of trying to spend years developing a product that had billion dollar competitors who were more capable of doing it, I focused on the home market – where 95% of seniors and disabled people who'd benefit most from our product lived – where most people who needed a hospital bed couldn't afford one – and where most falls, pressure sores and pneumonias occurred. We pivoted to an affordable hospital bed alternative that converts any bed into a hospital bed and monitors users for under \$500, and since then won Australian Student Startup of the Year, established relationships with the largest nursing homes in Australia and a beta-testing user-base of 300+ people interested in pre-ordering our product. We've received over \$150,000 in non-equity grant funding alone ([and are ready to launch our first product, which we are forecasting 7 figure revenues from in 12 months time](#)) soon!

I used this to **lose weight without trying.**

Instead of restricting myself to diets that I knew I didn't *want* to maintain for life, or exercises I simply couldn't sustain post treatment, I focused on changing my mindset on food. By looking at *WHY* I wanted to eat so much, and focusing on *slowly* reducing my portion sizes (we're talking over MONTHS), while eating what I loved, I figured I'd lose weight while eating what I loved, and doing what I wanted, without even knowing it. The app my startup has created will test this against other weight loss strategies, to establish further, if I'm right, how this could be a more sustainable way of losing weight and staying fit.

I used this to **win essay competitions, to think creatively** so my research could improve patient outcomes best, and to **win numerous grants, scholarships and prizes.** By looking at *everything* I have to do to stand out, *before* I'd even start, I'd give myself the best chance of succeeding. Ensuring every word and opportunity is used to show why my approach is best, I'd not only deliver the best results I could, but also keep improving my work to ensure it was the best.

I used this to **overcome chronic pain.** After struggling for years with these constant, horrid, painful spasms that were taking over my life, I decided to look at how chronic pain worked. When I realised that pain rewires your brain to become more sensitized and affected by it, I focused on doing the opposite processes for a while, until those same, maladaptive neuroplastic cortical maps, created a just as hard-to-break habit of ignoring pain. Despite having more pain than ever, despite being clinically depressed and suicidal in the past, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

I used this to **become a winning poker player**. Before coaching sites become easily accessible, I'd constantly assess why people were doing what they were doing, and work OFF the felt to ensure that when I played ON it, I was losing the least while winning the most. I've made a 6 figure profit playing poker, because I focused on learning the game, rather than hoping I'd learn by playing it more.

I used this to **find my own cure when I'd relapsed**.

When I had relapsed, of course, I couldn't help but feel down again. But by this point, I had a year of medical school knowledge under my belt. I read up, through journal articles, but mostly Wikipedia hopping (a method of learning I'd invented of clicking all the hyperlinks in a Wikipedia article, until I understood the whole thing), all that I could on my cancer. And then figured, in the time I had left, it'd be wiser to look up what treatments were at the forefront of treatment in my disease - given how low my chances of succeeding were. So I looked up my disease, and possible treatments on Clinical Trial databases, and found one which was not only being trialed often (meaning it was more promising) but also the one which applied most to my specific condition. I pitched it to my doctors, after they'd said no when I asked about it the first few times, and eventually, they agreed it could work in me. That drug, azacitidine, is probably why I'm able to write this today.

I used this to overcome loss, depression, and accomplish so much more.

Every time I face an obstacle, or challenge, of ANY nature, **I take a step back, look at all the options I can take, until I see the one that leaves me happiest and healthiest**.

I then **tell myself it's going to take time, allow myself to be human, but reaffirm this process over and over again**, until it becomes a habit.

And once I do this for one aspect of my life - for me, that was cancer - for you, that could be anything, small or large that you can make yourself feel pride for. Looking at things in this way becomes easier, and easier, and *faster* to do as well - as I've shown you through that science I talked about before, that I'll explain further in chapter 3.

This thought process, this new way of thinking, becomes your norm. You *automatically* seek the path that leads to you having the highest chance of happiness and success.

I've used that process to do all this. And because it's based on reason, and demonstrable science, I hope you've seen that YOU can do this to become the best version of you too.

In the next few chapters, I'll further discuss the science behind, and show you how you can use this mentality to

1. You're already in chapter 1...
2. How depression makes everything I've said useless, but how you CAN and SHOULD climb out of it too.

3. Understand the SCIENCE behind this all, which shows you HOW this works so you don't have to BELIEVE in anything - you'll KNOW it works.
3. Become the most creative, pragmatic version of you that's most likely to achieve their goals. Here I'll give you examples of how to become the best student, to think creatively, to improve your performance as an athlete, a more efficient thinker, whatever you want to do.
4. Become the most happy, self-content version of you. Here I'll show you how I became more happy with myself, and overcame social anxiety, and how you can too.
5. Lose weight, and stay fit without trying. I think this one's self-explanatory. But I've lost 20kg twice, and stayed at my target weight, while eating decently healthy, without trying, for years by just changing how I thought about food and exercise.
6. Overcome chronic pain, and even depression. This is self explanatory too. It worked for me. And I hope it can help those of you suffering out there too.
7. Deal with loss. Including a personal message to my loved ones in the midst of this crisis. But one that could help you when you least expect it, or help someone you know too.

And hopefully, through this, you'll be able to achieve whatever goal you want to accomplish through improving the most powerful weapon you have on your side in life. YOU.

I believe I've already shown you how you can use this to overcome major tragedies, and to give yourself a better way of looking at things. But in case you can't, please do reach out - whether it be to me, or someone else - including a professional.

And on that note, I'd like to close this first, opening 'chapter', by telling you that though this attitude is strong, and though it has changed my life and made me who I am, sometimes... it simply can't work.



## Chapter 2 – When You're Depressed, you Shouldn't Do This on Your Own.

I talk about dealing with many things, including loss, and depression, later on in this 'book'.

Particularly with these two though, but also with anything in life, we have to remember that we're human.

Sometimes you won't be able to find a second way of looking at things. No matter how much you take a step back, or how much you wrangle your brain, or look at other similar scenarios.

When your brain is rigged to make you feel down all the time, or when you're facing something you've never faced before for the first time - sometimes you need help.

Sure, if we're talking about how to overcome a tragedy, or get through an obstacle, asking someone else who's been through something similar, could be the best way to get through it. When we're overwhelmed, it can often be the ONLY way to pull through. But even when we're not, asking someone for help could be the best way to get through something. I mean, let's take a step back and think about it.

A friend or colleague or someone you hope to emulate or learn from already has a second perspective, or way of looking at things, built into them. And it's one that's most likely to fix your scenario because they've already done it!

Depression is a very real thing that we need to take more seriously.

I actually think depression was worse than cancer.

At least with cancer, there was an end in sight.  
When you're depressed, there is no end. Your mind is chemically rigged to feel like the world around you sucks, and that there's nothing you can, or should do about it.  
And many do walk around in this state, forever.

Even I, after years of using my own thought process, and years of learning about and advocating for people with depression, didn't realise I was going through depression when I was.

That's right. Even though I'm someone who found a second way of looking at a probably death sentence at 17 (in just 2 days), who got into medical school the very next year, who's played poker in some of the toughest online games, and with some amazing live pros. Even I, someone who's created a startup despite literally debilitating spasms and pain, and someone who found something to SMILE ABOUT 10 MINUTES AFTER BEING TOLD I MIGHT BE DEAD IN MONTHS... couldn't outthink depression when it struck.

Even I felt like there wasn't an end to my suffering.

Even I felt like there wasn't a way out. That I couldn't keep going.

Even I wanted to end it all. For a long time.

I almost acted on it one day.

The thing is, the first time I faced depression, it wasn't because of anything to do with cancer, or my health at all. It was because I lost a friend.

It doesn't matter what the root cause of it is – sometimes, there is no root cause – some people are chemically rigged to feel less optimistic about things normally...

Pain is pain.

It's subjective. Who's to say the pain I felt when going through cancer is worse than the pain of someone who's struggling to pay the bills for 4 children week by week? Or the pain of someone who hasn't felt *good* about anything for decades. Indeed, trauma psychologists suggest the levels of trauma experienced by child soldiers [is similar to that of Northern Sydney children whose parents haven't hugged them for years](#).

Anyone can feel depressed at anytime. We're often programmed, by society, and often, ourselves, to feel like "we've got to move on." That "we've got to be strong." That "we should just get over it." But depression is something that will affect 1/2 of us. Some of us are more prone to feel depressed all the time. And when you are depressed you often can't snap out of it yourself. No matter how amazing some dude's motivational help book may seem.

The science behind my process of reasoned optimism is based on normal minds.

Sure, you can bust through depression yourself. I did, after all, use this process to beat through, and start ignoring chronic pain, that was largely made worse BY depression.

But ask yourself this.

Why should you?

Similar to the logic above, why NOT try and access someone else's advice and inputs? It only increases your chances of getting out of a slump, and reduces the time you're in it.

Hell, if it wasn't for medicines, the depression I suffered from due to chronic pain could have killed me.

Depression is a fickle beast. It makes you feel like you're alone, when you're not.

Think about it this way, if you're feeling pain, and down, and knew a friend was feeling what you were. Wouldn't you wanna be there for them? Well, in that same way, they'd wanna be there for you too.

Seeing a professional may seem weird. It did to me, the first few times. But the very thing that makes them weird is the thing that's best about them.

They're strangers. You don't have to see them every day. Which means there's no fear of judgement. You can tell them anything you like, and not care about what they think.

They're literally, legally, not allowed to tell anyone what you told them. So there's no fear of reprisals either.

And finally... they're literally professionals at what they do. They've likely seen someone like you, or someone feeling like you are before. Why make yourself suffer any longer than you need to?

When I saw a pain psychiatrist for the first time, I'd already overcome my chronic pain for a while, and taught myself methods of ignoring it through learning about chronic pain, their management strategies, and using my process to give myself a second, better way of looking at things. When I talked to them, they were suggesting the things I was already doing. Which meant for years, between 2014 to the end of 2017, because I didn't even contemplate that a psychiatrist was someone I should see to help me deal with my pain, I suffered unnecessarily.

What could have been some of the best years of my life were some of my worst because of that.

Don't deny yourself the opportunity to feel better, and don't put off doing so, if you don't have to.

If you can't find someone to help get you out of your misery - sign up to my email list at [Centered Around You \(caroundyou.com\)](https://caroundyou.com). Alongside being an app that tests the efficacy of wellness interventions and things like CBT and what I advocate for in this book, powered by machine learning, it'll also be a place where you can learn from others who've been through similar things.

And don't fall into another of depression's traps of making you feel like it's your friend either.

Depression becomes your new norm. Self pity, sadness, and feeling down, though it seems weird to those on the outside, actually becomes comfortable. Your set point. Where you feel comfortable. And breaking free of that doesn't just feel uncomfortable, or seem impossible - you don't even *want* to do it.

But when you're feeling at your lowest, the next time you are, I hope you remember these words. It's something that helped me decide that I HAD to find a way out of this dark hole I'd found myself in once and for all.

Life is a LONG thing. Why make it any harder than it needs to be? Why not enjoy the parts we want to enjoy most?

If nothing else in this book sticks. I hope that this does for some of you.

And now - to the rest of the chapters. Skip ahead to what you'd like me to explain most, or feel free to keep reading on.

1. Preface
2. How I used reason to Justify Optimism, rather than used Optimism to give myself Reason.
3. The Science behind Neuroplasticity, Self Distancing, and "Reasoned Optimism".
4. Becoming the Most Successful YOU
5. Becoming the most Self Content YOU
6. Becoming the Healthiest, Fittest YOU
7. How to Overcome Chronic Pain
8. How to Deal with Loss.

## Chapter 3 - The science;

I know what you're thinking. For a so called "evidence based" book, there hasn't been THAT thorough an evaluation of scientific principles displayed thus far. I mean where are the easy to read EndNote references?

Well, I'm in hospital. Unfortunately, I only get to download EndNote onto 1 device, and I ain't about to spend a chunk of what could be the rest of my life doing Vancouver Style referencing. I hope these links to papers' abstracts on databases will help you find answers to what you're looking for if you're interested in something, but believe me, you won't need scientific training to understand this chapter.

Giving you something solid to justify your belief in this whole process working makes you more likely to choose to adopt it. What could be more solid than scientific papers?

That's WHY this chapter exists. And that's why I'm making it easy to understand.

Of course, as this is a process that happens over time, you may be wondering, "Why isn't there an app that can help me walk through these processes?" Well, there is.

In case I don't make it through the surgery, I've left my engineers with a roadmap of how to use machine learning to power such a thing. You can sign up for that at [CAroundYou.com](http://CAroundYou.com)

But yeah... Of course... at 17, I had no idea that this process that got me through the trauma that facing your own mortality brings had any scientific justification behind it at all. At that time, it was the only thing that made SENSE to do. The basis of science is logic after all. And taking a step back allows your logical frontal cortex to take the fore.

That's what's beautiful about this process. Because it's based on reason, it doesn't require belief, something people at their lowest simply don't have.

But it was when I was struggling with what I feel is the hardest thing I've had to deal with – chronic pain – that I realised that almost all of what I was doing was backed by neurobiological science, and psychological principles. Off science that can be visualised in the lab.

This process that got me through emotional distress, I'll call REASONED OPTIMISM. Unlike the usual Motivational, Positivity BS, it's not just hollow words thrown at you... reasoned optimism is a process that gives you something to be positive about. A process that you can apply in any situation. One that, as I'll show you, you can make a habit - your norm, your go to.

But this doesn't just confer optimism. Self distancing - taking a step back - questioning all your doubts and fears and then taking the path that leaves you happiest, healthiest, and most successful, is a thought process that is also shown, scientifically, to work too. Though I

haven't given this a name yet, neuroplasticity engrains this process of constant Logical Reframing (is that a title), into an automatic process that you'll find yourself using to break down ANY challenge you face into basic, bite sized, beatable pieces. The more you use it, the better you get. This chapter shows you HOW this process forms, and then how you can use it to your advantage best.

## Why “Taking a Step Back” Works.

This whole process of taking a step back, breaking things down until I found a second better way of looking at things, can be visualised in the lab.

A self-distanced perspective is described as that of someone looking at themselves as if [they're a fly on the wall](#). In the short term, this [stops you from reacting emotionally](#), it reduces blood flow to limbic centres - it makes you more logical - and in the long term, [it stops you from ruminating, or lingering over, things you can't control](#).

When you do take that step back, [your medial pre-frontal cortex, which, when firing, is associated with feelings of negativity, fires less](#). It's shown to [increase the ability for depressed people to think more broadly, and fixate less](#). It's shown to make you more objective - you're more likely to understand, and [be realistic about things like understanding your chances of winning the lottery](#) by doing it. [Older adults, demonstrate lower blood flow to emotional centres of the brain](#) and because of this, are what we call *wiser* - more logical, less likely to react emotionally, and they're also more likely to have higher happiness scores. I JUST GAVE YOU THE SCIENTIFIC REASON WHY OLD PEOPLE DON'T GIVE A F\*\*\*.

Reducing your reactivity to emotion makes you more likely to pick happier outcomes. And the act of self distancing from a scenario or construct leads to you reacting less emotionally. THAT is how self distancing makes you more resilient.

[Decreased firing of limbic, emotional centres, seen on functional MRI brain scans](#), is seen along with increases to prefrontal, logical brain activity. When self distancing, [your blood pressure also lowers and stress responses decrease](#), which ultimately increases your ability to work through a problem.

Looking at things from afar, from a time perspective, a similar principle, and extension of this model of self regulated thought, describes when someone places themselves in [certain scenarios and evaluates their options consistently](#). It is demonstrated that this broad minded way of thinking led to better outcomes, and more resolutions in negotiation exercises, and better overall performance in general. It's a “winning” way to view the world.

Even the *physical* act of distancing is shown to improve your capability to think more broadly and accomplish more tasks. When participants in this study actively leaned back in their seats, [they were able to accomplish more challenges set as part of a study.](#)

**That's why, when you take a step back, you become**

- a) Less emotional.
- b) More logical.
- c) Better able to bounce back from a problem. And
- d) Better able to negotiate your way through challenges.

**But what next? How do you FIND that second way of looking at things?**

After taking that step back, putting yourself in numerous scenarios, and testing assumptions by questioning them over and over again, comes next.

That process seems overwhelming, but breaking down the multitude of potential options into smaller and smaller chunks makes it easier to visualise a target. Over time, by doing this over and over again, you not only get better, but also get faster and more efficient at going through this thought process. How exactly this happens, I'll explain when talking about neuroplasticity (this comes next).

Taking that step back makes this whole process easier though. It makes you more LOGICAL.

And as I talked about in that section on depression above... when you look for options outside those your own brain can conjure, you allow yourself the best chance of success in whatever you do.

Don't limit yourself to what you know, and what you can learn. Learn from others.

Whether it be looking deep into what markets your competitors target on Facebook ads to sell the same product more efficiently, you researching how people target a species of fish and combining that with local knowledge to make your trip more successful, or you ASKING

SOMEONE ELSE (other human beings come with an inbuilt second perspective), you give yourself the best chance of succeeding by skipping the hypothesis and and focusing on what works.

It's similar to reading a review rather than looking for random answers on numerous databases when trying to find out how to treat a patient with an interesting condition.

Similar to asking for a second opinion, or taking free consultations with law firms before proceeding with one to explore all your options.

I mean, why spend 3 hours trying to cast, and estimate how deep a channel you're fishing in is, when you can find the best spot the night before using Google Satellites and free Marine navigation maps?

This isn't just logic. It's proven to work. Collaborating on a task, especially when combined with [instructions to think things through objectively](#), and even [leaning back in a chair to physically distance yourself](#), led to better negotiation outcomes in complex team tasks, and better scores in puzzle like challenges.

Though sometimes you have to, and though learning to react and make optimal decisions on your own to various scenarios is important, often, you stand to save yourself hours, resources and pain by looking for answers elsewhere first.

In general though – if you find yourself stuck on a certain obstacle... Something you, even when taking a step back, and engaging the most logical, objective, and astute version of you, can't find a way to surmount, just ask yourself WHY? HOW? WHERE? Over and over again, until you do. OR – ask a friend.

**The longer you do this, the better you get.** The more easy it becomes. The more automatically you'll do this... for whatever struggle you encounter.



## Some examples;

### To live, or die?

Recently, literally 2 days before open heart surgery that prompted me to up the timeline of writing this, my cousin, a cardiologist, told me to urgently get the opinion of a heart transplant physician. A bypass surgery is risky enough as it is. But with someone with a rejection like disease process like me (graft versus host disease, a side effect of my bone marrow transplant)... the risks are even higher, as the vessels which supply my heart are likely narrowed, and will continue to narrow, over time. And unless you work at a transplant hospital, you may never comprehend the importance of this. My disease is rare too, making it even less likely it would be considered. My cardiologists at my treating hospital were certainly not too concerned and dismissive of it and intent on proceeding with surgery

.

Heart transplant hospitals are rare, and their doctors really busy. It was gonna be a challenge to get seen. But as I was told myself of this risk which could impact future transplantation option or kill me if surgery didn't work, I immediately took a step back. Instead of panicking, and from there, it made sense to instead, focus that angst and anxiety into what I should be doing.

I focused on all the paths I had in front of me and evaluated them.

Yeah, the doctors weren't concerned, but I got my haematologist, who coordinates care, on my side to ask the senior cardiologist to ask for a second opinion. Get a doctor on your side here? Check.

I asked my cousin to formalise a letter to me with the opinions he had from himself and 2 colleagues who are also transplant doctors in the US (so I wouldn't appear, to the doctors, as a panicking patient who'd read something on the internet). Get an expert opinion to back your claim up? Check.

I looked up the doctor my haematologist recommended is best, found his email, and summarised my concerns, with the letter from my cousins attached, and then called up his private practices to see if I could book an appointment. Alternative routes of seeing him? Check.

When told he was booked for months, unintentionally on the phone, the secretary reacted to me saying I was a bone marrow transplant patient. I used to be treated at the heart transplant hospital (they do bone marrow transplants too) and she immediately saw it was more concerning.

I also got my general physician to write an urgent referral, after convincing her of my situation's importance. Get the secretary on my side? Check.

I could have gone down many other paths, and these did cross my mind.

I could have Panicked.

*But why? That would have gotten me nowhere.*

I could have left the hospital and entered the transplant hospital's ED.

*That is disrespectful, but given how major an operation that is, perhaps reasonable. But I'd spend a day having results shifted from 1 hospital to the other, have to wait for another surgery slot, which could be dangerous (I literally can't walk to the bathroom without panting and being in pain), and not have my concerns taken seriously because of this action.*

I could have given up and resigned myself to the surgery.

*But that could lead to a dangerous surgery.*

And then I waited. Eventually, between all these systems, we got a response. And now my surgeon here, at the non transplant hospital, is aptly prepared for the surgery, in case things do go wrong. I'm in the safest hands possible, in one of the best hospitals in Sydney, and under the care of one of the best surgeons for this procedure in the country. It all worked out.

### **To go clinical, and publish impactfully tomorrow, or cure cancer?**

Similarly, when it came to picking my topic for research... I had options.

*Go down a guaranteed path of doing work on immunotherapies, particularly in melanoma, but looking at the effects of a drug in clinical trials to or try looking at PD-1 inhibitors inhibitor biology, and tumor vaccines, which aren't going to show immediate clinical outcomes, but for which I'd have to look deep into HOW immune cells worked instead?*

Given my long term goal of wanting to develop a system which recognises cancer cells and creates targets of them THROUGH cellular immunotherapy, I needed to look into the biology of the immune system. So I chose the latter option instead.

### **To take on Investment or wait it out?**

When I found myself thinking about whether I should take on an investment in my company a year in, I also had options.

*Take the money, and use it to accelerate product development and leverage their contacts to get into nursing homes quicker, or not take it, develop the product on our own, and sell to the general public?*

I chose option 2. Not only was our product's development timeline affected more by bottlenecks in testing and verification (as many medical devices' timelines are) than by our lack of cash, but option 2 also reduced stress on me both personally, from a health perspective, and also for my end goal of wanting to make an impact. We could experiment more with different features we want to add to our non invasive movement, and vital rate sensors, and integrative nurse/caretaker alert system, rather than be forced to enter the market prematurely, and limit our upside, and our potential to reach our end goal of bridging the gap between home and healthcare.

That path also let me be more flexible, in case my health got in the way. Which it clearly has.

You'll always have a second way of looking at things. Numerous paths that you can take.

The science which underlies this whole process, is based on this concept central to learning, memory and habit formation – neuroplasticity.

## **Where neuroplasticity, and long term planning, comes into all of this.**

Key to this whole process's success, is **reinforcing** this. Walking through that thought process over and over.

Neuroplasticity, as I said earlier, can basically be broken down to this principle. "Neurons that fire together, wire together."

Your brain sends signals in coordinated patterns. [A thought is merely the combined, coordinated firing of a chain of connected neurons.](#) These connections are called synapses, junctions, into which pour 'neurotransmitters'. Neurotransmitters attach to receptors and basically enable electrical signals to pass between two neurotransmitters.

The more these synapses fire, or the more these junctions have neurotransmitters ooze into them, a process called "[long term potentiation](#)" occurs. Neurons become more and more likely to fire together, because an increased exposure to neurotransmitters leads to the same

amount of neurotransmitters requiring less in the way of a threshold to initiate a signal, and more an impact when a signal is given.

Over time, a group of neurons firing together which underlie a movement, a habit, or a thought process, solidify into a [cortical map](#). [This video](#) outlines this in easy to understand principles. If you're keen – go watch it (remember, the reason why I outline all these things is so that YOU believe in this process, making YOU more likely to succeed).

When you practice something, be it learning to shoot a basketball, a ditty on the piano, or to create a new habit, it's hard to even coordinate an action at the beginning. But the more and more you do it, the easier it becomes. At a cellular level, this is because those synapses that create the desired effect – of you getting a shot in, playing the right notes, or remembering to put your keys in that one spot – as you're *trying* to do them, become stronger than that of you missing, stuffing up or forgetting.

The self assurance you give when you get something right plays a part – [dopamine, the reward hormone, increases, and is shown to focus the formation of stronger cortical maps](#). So make SURE you pat yourself on the back. It helps you get there faster.

But this neuroplasticity also forms because you simply repeat correct actions more.

There's a theory, most used in sports; [the 4 stages of competency model](#). When learning a new action, there are 4 stages –

- 1) Unconscious incompetence – you have no idea what to do and how to do it.
- 2) Conscious incompetence – you're failing, but you know why and how to do it.
- 3) Conscious competence – you're succeeding, when you think through it
- 4) Unconscious competence – you're succeeding without even thinking about it

Though disputed, and [though many suggest there are additional stages](#), that last stage is achieved best when you think *systematically*, in *processes*, like this one.

You simply can't prepare for every scenario all the time. There are an infinite amount of possibilities in life... Whether it be when looking at how many ways the defence responds to a drive in basketball, how an opponent will respond to every bet in a hand of poker, or how a market will react to a piece of news about a project. We can't KNOW what happens.

When you can't even comprehend how many outcomes you have, yet alone plan, and *reinforce* how you react to those plans through neuroplasticity, the most efficient way of

[succeeding is to reinforce a THOUGHT PROCESS](#) that helps you deal with all possible scenarios. (don't worry, the science behind this is explained in literally the next half page or so too).

And when you reinforce it enough... you create that positive feedback loop, where you're always trying to improve yourself, relishing in your success when you do, so that you keep trying to improve even more.

But when you've accomplished mastery of a skill, or habit, or thought process... stage 4, of applying it ***automatically***, becomes important.

The great thing is, when you work on a thought process for everything, as I do, you incite so much long term potentiation between synapses that it goes from a thought process, to an *automatic* reaction. **It doesn't require bravery. It doesn't require willpower. It won't even require extra thought.** It becomes your path of least resistance.

Our body is designed to conserve as much energy as possible. And your brain is responsible for as much as 20% of your body's energy consumption. If you make thinking about what you CAN do, as opposed to focusing on what you can't, through habitually taking a step back, and objectively picking the best route you can take going forwards, [this WILL become your path of least resistance](#), and you'll be able to accomplish whatever goal you set your mind to, even more easily.

And when it's automatic, it doesn't require effort. It means you're even more likely to succeed because you're constantly, quickly doing tasks in the most efficient manner, and you're able to spend more brain-power on things that matter, and on REAL decision making too.

The difference between an IQ of 100 (average) and 140 (close to genius levels) is how many things you can juggle in your mind at once.

Hacking your brain to solidify these thought processes as your norm leads to you being more likely to succeed.

## Some examples; Neuroplasticity in Action

### How this works in tragedies, I've already explained above.

But when I was told even more dire news... When I was told I relapsed, at first... my mind immediately jumped to the fear of that word... *"Again?"*. I'm human. We all are. Fear is a natural response to a threat.

But after a few seconds that thought process kicked in. Yeah... This sucked. Yeah my odds were lower even than at diagnosis (I was told palliative care might be a preferred option)... But first off, I wasn't told that this was the end. I had a year of medical knowledge under my belt, a family of doctors, an amazing healthcare system, and the time to find something that could work (I eventually [did end up finding the drug that's kept me alive](#) myself, pitched it to my doctors, and convinced them to get it!).

Even if I hadn't though, why spend my last days languishing in pain and misery a second longer than I needed to, when instead, I could focus on spending every single moment with my family, friends and enjoying the world for what it had to offer. Even if they told me I had 3 months left to live... In the end... I'd have 3 months left... *to LIVE*.

**When faced with an opportunity to get a prize that adds credence to our business** for my startup, Get to Sleep Easy, winning Best Startup Engineer for my CTO and good friend, Nick Rabey, I found support on Facebook and other posts, soliciting votes, not generating enough traction. We only had ONE WEEK to get hundreds of votes. Every second counted. Given the commitment a voter has to go to click a link, find the page, verify an email, etc., I realised personal content that struck home more to people would lead to higher uptake. So I pumped out personal content that related to the business – why I was doing it, how awesome Nick was, and linked everything else – even memes I usually post on my blog - back to what I was doing and my engineer. This not only won him the prize, but signed up 13 more people to our committed to buy Kickstarter email list (which should convert to over \$5000 in revenue when we launch) in the meantime!

But this process also works in more immediate, less traditional settings.

**On the basketball court, when down by 4 with 30 seconds left to go**, instead of spending one of the 5 – 6 tasks you can juggle in your head at once on the fear of missing your shot, you'll instead be focusing on figuring out what defensive matchups the opposition has focused on.

What coach had told you about the play, and then beyond that, what to do if a particular screen failed to get you open, and which spaces would likely get you a free shot.

The fear of failure, you'll be mitigating by focusing instead on that second way of looking at things that actually benefits you – how winning would feel for your teammates, how it elevates your chances of a championship, of getting featured on Sports Centre for your career, of becoming the most complete basketballer you can be.

If you can do this – you'll give yourself the best chance of succeeding. And that's what this is all about.

## **HOW these thought processes are formed and solidified.**

Neuroplasticity is the foundation of learning, memory and habit formation.

But its uses aren't limited to learning movements, as in sports, as many believe.

It's used to develop thought processes too. And it works best when you give yourself a GOAL to accomplish, and get there by reaffirming BEHAVIOURS which eventually solidify into THOUGHT PROCESSES that become your habit.

That's where reinforcement of the above 'process' of

- 1) Taking a step back and then
- 2) Breaking down your major obstacles into chunks that you can counter and follow

Is one that you need to practice.

Sure, it's easy enough to visualise a goal of increasing your first serve percentage in tennis. But when talking about implementing behavioural change, or the cementing of a new thought pattern or response, it can seem harder to do so.

But remember, self rewarding is key to focusing the effects of neuroplasticity. Though a GOAL of "becoming more motivated and less lazy" may seem hard... you can plan for it in advance, by taking that step back and looking at all the paths you have to take. From there, the BEHAVIOUR of walking yourself through that process again and again of reaffirming why that path you believe will lead to you being the most productive version of you, will help cement this THOUGHT PROCESS into your brain's very neural circuitry.

And as stated earlier, not only does self affirming, rewarding yourself when you get closer to your goal with a little "YES," lead to dopamine firing which focuses neuroplastic map formation, the closer you get to a goal, the more dopamine you fire as you get there. Meaning it actually becomes easier and EASIER the longer you do it.

When you combine this with you not being too hard on yourself... it creates an amazing feedback loop.

When you do put your keys on the rack, or make a good, strategic decision that helps you eke out the answer to a tough question, or do stop yourself from getting angry at a family member, or colleague, you feel good about yourself. You start thinking more about how you'll do this next time. You'll relish in an improved version of you. And soon, you won't even have to THINK to keep doing this. It WILL BECOME your norm!

## How long does it take?

Generally, estimates of 6 weeks are given when talking [how long it takes to form a new habit](#).

But it's not like we flounder about unable to make a lay-up, or possibly kick a goal 10 from 10 feet away for 6 weeks...

We get better at this over time. Similarly, when reinforcing a new thought process, or way to process an action, you don't need to keep taking a step back and asking yourself "WHY?" or "HOW" over and over. Over time, it becomes easier to do. Long term potentiation's effects occur much sooner. Some studies show cats form quite solid cortical maps in 2 days.

And as talked about above, by self rewarding the closer you get there, and creating that positive feedback loop of always focusing on what you can control, [you accelerate the development of long term potentiation](#), and make it easier to get there. You release more and more dopamine.

When I used this to overcome chronic pain, I expected it to take that 6 week period to begin ignoring it. But when I started ignoring it a week in, and beat back the beast that had been on my back for years, the next 5 weeks felt like 1. I felt I was kicking this beast's ass. I may well have actually made the process take just 2-3 weeks by focusing the development of a cortical map that helped me step away from pain by rewarding myself with hits of dopamine every time I did so!

But just as important as that, is ensuring you don't burn out. That's why the last, arguably most crucial part of Reasoned Optimism is allowing yourself to be human.



# Letting yourself be human = a higher chance of success!

Failure. It happens to everyone. Clichéd as this may be, it's undeniable that it's also one of the best opportunities to learn too.

Preparing for it, is shown to increase your ability to bounce back, [to be resilient, post failure](#). And though I can regale you with examples of how acceptance committence therapy holds most central to its philosophy, the idea that [you should confront fears, and potential barriers to improve your likelihood to demonstrate resilience](#), and how this actually adds to the effect of developing a process that neuroplastically helps you bounce back... in the end, it just makes sense.

If you're not forcing yourself to be superhuman, you're less likely to miss potential pitfalls, and less likely to break down. If [you have reason behind motivation](#), you're more likely to maintain it. If you're happier and more accepting of yourself and your failures, [you're more likely to succeed in behavioural change interventions](#).

That idea, of acceptance committence therapy, is better than CBT alone, broadly speaking, [because it embeds in it, planning to get past and through obstacles](#).

And by NOT forcing yourself to be an amazing inspiration, strong, to work 120 hour weeks, and "grin and bear" hardship, you [demonstrably have a lower chance of burnout](#), and even [score higher on exams than someone who doesn't](#) by performing self care. Sleep deprivation is [also shown to have similar effects to being drunk](#).

Falling every now and then isn't weak. It actually leads you to be stronger and increases the likelihood to succeed.

And though I hate HOW people like Gary Vaynercheuk screams at people to LOVE FAILURE – it's no less true that by using this process, you automatically, in time, begin to crave it. You genuinely see it as something to learn from.

Feeling bad isn't weak either. Sadness is one of the 6 basic emotions we feel, as humans, we're going to feel it. But it's also shown, by science, that by looking in the [long run, we increase our chances of success](#). I'm a poker player. Over the course of a hand, a tournament, hell, even 1000 hands – 30-40 hours of poker – against an opponent, even the worst player can beat Doug Polk at his prime, or Phil Ivey, on any given day.

But if I were to play 100,000 hands against them, I'd lose, every single time. As most people would lose, every single time playing against me.

If you dwell on the short term, like many, you will either try and chase your losses and lose everything, or wanna give up and quit. The former is something that happens to a LOT of poker players. It is gambling after all, and you can lose everything.

But the ones that succeed focus on playing well every time they do. They often get satisfaction from that, just as much as winning big.

And by focusing on the long term, on the process, you not only keep yourself sane, but allow yourself the best opportunity to move up stakes in Life.

As long as you're on a general trajectory towards success, you'll eventually get there. It only becomes a matter of TIME from there on. And by looking at things in the long run, you give yourself the highest chance of getting there.

## Chapter 4) - How to be a more successful, dangerous you with this information

That's the science behind this process of Reasoned Optimism.

But do you need to be optimistic to be successful in day to day life? In your career? To achieve your goals?

How can this process even help you become a better version of you?

Well central to this process of reasoned optimism is the idea that you can always change yourself for the better. You can always improve.

When not using this mentality to get through drama, or trouble, you're still looking for the best pathway to take going forwards. When you're using this to make yourself the best version of you though, I do need a better name for it. So far, I've come up with Consistent Logical Reframing.

And as the science above just demonstrated, by:

- 1) Taking a step back
- 2) Questioning all your doubts, fears, and obstacles, and evaluating what path is best for you.
- 3) Repeating this, and reinforcing your beliefs and
- 4) Rewarding yourself when you succeed, and focus on learning, and the long run, when you don't

You give yourself the best chance of making yourself the most happy, healthy and successful version of yourself.

Herein, I'll talk about how you can use this method to always keep improving, to hack the pathways and principles of neuroplasticity to optimise your thinking, and always keep improving.

To become the best version of you. I'll use some personal examples, and some hypothetical ones. Often they're what I give when I've spoken to corporates or sports teams in the past.

Whatever the case, I hope they can help you out too.

How to use this process to become the most dangerous you.

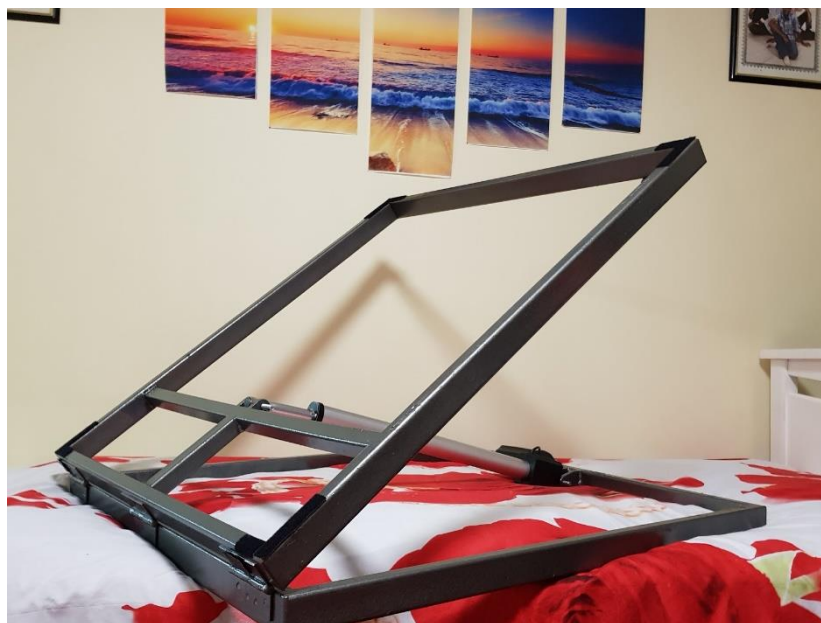
Creativity is NOT an inherent trait. You CAN think outside the box WITHOUT “talent”

So I've founded a company that has promise to shake up how we monitor patients at home. Together with my engineers, we've identified gaps and holes in current products, identified the major pain point hospitals and nursing homes faced, and designed our own product which fills that gap and will hopefully make life safer and easier for our most vulnerable (while also reducing work and hassle for healthcare workers and caretakers).

And it does this AFFORDABLY too - so we can get to where we wanna go. Where the market is largest. Where the problems of falls, pressure sores and preventable illnesses happens most. At Home.

The first product is “The Smart Inclining Bed,” a device which performs one simple operation - that of a hospital bed lifting someone up - but is designed to work with your current bed, indeed, it works with ANY bed, to do this. All for less than \$400 retail. [You can check that out here. Hopefully, we'll be able to launch this once I get out of hospital.](#)

The main innovations are the design of the frame, as it fits to, and works with any style of mattress and bed frame, adjusts, if required to, while not weighing too much. This eliminates the major hurdle for people who need a hospital bed most - cost. It's also easy to set up, safe, and more comfortable, because it uses YOUR OWN BED rather than some cheap, flimsy, hospital bed mattress. We've even generated pre-sales from users who just wanna Netflix in Bed because it's so cheap and intuitive.



We were gonna launch this on Kickstarter, but as I'm in hospital, we may just launch it straight away as a product in the next few months. [Sign up anyways to be alerted of its progress at GetToSleepEasy.org/Kickstarter](#)

This could reduce rates of falls, and help people at risk of severe pneumonias get well faster, by helping people sit up.

But though it seems amazing, and so intuitive, we didn't start off this way.

After losing 2 friends in a week to preventable illnesses - one to falls, and one to pneumonia - I originally set out to create a feature packed hospital bed that would do it all. Current ward beds cost a chunk, but through the implementation of specialised compression massage prongs, extra lifting functions, and things like hospital trapezes and sensors which could detect movement and heart rates that would be embedded in, I figured that this integral part of hospital furniture could be used to prevent things like blood clots, falls, and pressure sores while saving nurses precious time.

I'd looked into the research. I'd talked to nurses about it. It wasn't a bad idea... and would make a difference, if we could pull it off.

But then I took a step back, and thought about the market.

Like many who want to start something up, despite my spending years learning, passively, about finance, economics, market forces, and marketing - I rushed in with passion, trying to create a solution - without thinking deeply about not just IF people would buy it (if I could develop something like this, they likely would), but what would be involved in getting there.

Maybe hospitals would buy it if I could raise millions to create something like this.

But not only did I realise it's MUCH harder to develop something from scratch in the medical device industry than you'd think, what's to stop any competitor from copying us?

Right now, the hospital bed market doesn't innovate in general ward beds, even though 8 - 10% of people who are admitted to hospital over 65 will fall, even though it costs hospitals millions - they make MUCH more money investing into the research and development of surgical beds and theater equipment, which sell for HUNDREDS of thousands (as opposed to \$5000 for a ward bed).

So instead, I went back to square 1 and asked ALL parties about this.  
I took a step back and, looked at all my options.

Nursing homes and assisted living facilities would get a hospital bed, or adjusting bed, for all their clientele. But right now, it simply costs way too much.

Hospitals will require almost a decade, of R&D, for you to establish your brand, and then a few more years before they enter larger government tenders (not to mention, half a decade for their current beds to pass use-by dates), before they'd commit to buying.

And people at home - where 95% of elderly people lived - who experience these problems most, simply couldn't afford these, or even if they could, couldn't possibly instal these, or justify the effort and resource commitment to bring them home.

All 3 of these cried out about another problem too. There was no way for 24/7 staffed hospitals to know if their patients were safe, yet alone even more burdened, and less staffed nursing homes, or those of us who just wanna keep our loved ones at home safe.

Given this, we went back to the drawing board, and decided to focus on creating an AFFORDABLE, AUTOMATIC solution that can fix both of these issues.

### [Our Smart Inclining Bed is cheap.](#)

It works with your current bed.

You just have to plug it in and play.

And the sensors underneath this fix the even bigger problem and allow us to scale too. Our sensors use stretch fabric, AND traditional point pressure sensors, to map your whole body's movement patterns, as well as breath and heart rates, non invasively (the mat lies underneath a user). The latter fixes a problem faced by hospitals every day in and of itself - even as I lay in this hospital bed writing this, I know that in an hour, as I'm just getting to sleep, this poor nurse will have to come in and wake me up, to take down my vital signs.

But the ability to map user movements is what has every hospital and nursing home we're partnered with excited.

Pressure sores, which develop when lying in the same position for a long time, after oxygen is deprived from your tissues leading to the formation of a wound, can last for years. They cost \$49,000 - 120,000 to treat, depending on where you're from. And over ¼ nursing home residents in Australia have one when they come to hospital.

35% of people over 65 will fall any year. 8-10% of people in hospital over 65 will sustain a serious fall that leads to further hospitalisation. 60-70% happen when getting out of bed. And over 20% of people who fall won't be seen for over an hour. One of my best friend's cousin passed away after having one. She wasn't seen for over 20 hours.

Our sensors have the ability to change that.

And by connecting it to an app, which monitors all these parameters, and uses machine learning, and literature reviews, and doctors' insights to provide updates to health professionals and carers of patient status.

These innovations are pretty cool, if I do say so myself.

But when taking a step back, taking the emotion away from things, and thinking about the strategy behind them - I knew that though we'd made a dent in the development of that hospital bed thus far, by pivoting, and creating, instead, the Smart Inclining Bed, we'd be entering a completely new, larger market (the hospital bed market is worth \$7bn a year, the mattress/pillow market... \$70bn), that's growing (the aged population is set to double by 2040), with a completely new, disruptive product that we wouldn't have competitors against.

The development we had done, the regulations we had looked into - it wasn't wasted. Instead, it ensured that we're developing a safe product that complies with medical device regulatory standards worldwide.

That made so much more sense.

The sensors - when it came to developing the technology, we used Elon Musk-esque strategies of examining the base economics of a problem and solution, and hypothesized, tested, and developed a solution that could do the same thing, or better, for a fraction of the price. Principles remarkably similar to my own process.

When examining the [first-principles](#) of a Space Ship, in other words, taking a step back and breaking down the operations to their base levels, Elon realised that materials only comprised 2% of the cost of a spaceship. That development, management and other factors increased price. And also that a large portion of the costs incurred could be saved by making essential components of a space ship reusable.

After a few test and trials, that company is set to be a large player in the private space industry for decades.

Our strategy, to also create an app which can connect to other devices, not only fills a HUGE gap that can create a massive impact - of monitoring vulnerable people at home and tracking their results over time - but also makes us more attractive to investors.

Right now, when you come into emergency unconscious... If you don't have a family member nearby who knows your medications, and history (not always the case, as most people who are older and prone to hospitalisation live independently), there's no easy way for them to know what's wrong with you, or what could make your condition worse.

When you go to your primary care physician for a checkup, and happen to be super relaxed, or extra stressed, your blood pressure reading may be higher or lower than normal, and you may be started on therapies that aren't necessary or ideal.

And of course, when you're at home, and fall, you literally don't make a noise, unless you happen to have a sensor which can detect your body's movement, and track, over time, how much force you use to get up out of bed, and which listens for thumps and screams.

In essence, there's a HUGE gap between home and healthcare.

The *CONNECTIVITY* of our devices, though this will take us longer to develop, is what will allow us to *REALLY* succeed.

Creativity doesn't need to come from a spark. Indeed, the best innovations, the things that have made the biggest difference over time, have often come from looking at problems, evaluating solutions, and picking the one that is the best one for you in that circumstance.

You don't need to be a genius to create something amazing these days.

Startup theories of Lean Canvassing, and then developing and testing products iteratively through LEAN/AGILE methodologies, though they seem 'constrictive' and 'not cool' or 'bureaucratic' to many (including me, for a while) - when you start something up... it works.

Instead of wasting time and resources trying to build something that may not ever be used, why not build to what customers need and add features as you go along, generating revenue on the way?

You cut your losses and figure out things you may never have seen before by doing so.

Reasoned Optimism, or, in the case of NON optimistic applications, “Logical Reframing,” the thought process of always taking a step back when you face something new, and finding the second, third, fourth and ultimately, best path to follow, going forwards, ***makes you someone who does this as your norm.***

If you do it enough, you’ll not only get these ‘sparks’ of creativity more often - you’ll also find yourself optimising your life through the little things.

When looking through your emails, and noticing that you’re spending everyday mostly deleting the spam email newsletters for things you signed up for years ago but never even open today (though you’ve always meant to), you’ll automatically unsubscribe, knowing you’ll save yourself an extra few hours a year by doing so. Unsubscribing from everything but the email list of this amazing guy’s book that you happened to have read, that is ([click here to never look at my emails!!!!](#)).

Instead of spending hours looking at what brands of food you eat to figure out which is healthiest, and driving miles to get that special brand you’ve determined is best (but may only help you a tiny bit), you’ll find an app which updates that for you and gets you good deals, delivered to your door.

Instead of always finding yourself stressing, and running around for 10 minutes before an important appointment, looking for your phone, wallet and keys, you’ll take about a week to keep reminding yourself of WHY you’re putting your keys and wallet on the hallway table or by your bedside (instead of on the dining table one day, and the sofa the next etc), rewarding yourself with a wry smile when you do find them in seconds as you’re walking out the door, and soon, be able to find them without even thinking about it.

Hell, if you become as obsessive about it as me, when cooking, you’ll automatically be telling yourself, “Hey! Why not put the water on boil, and add tea leaves and sugar into the pot, while putting peanut butter on my bread, and create 2 cups for Mum or Dad too, rather than waiting around idly for 5 minutes, or trying to do all that after you add milk!” Efficiency, and choosing the best option becomes your NORM.



## Using this to Maximise Performance.

Practice off the pitch, to improve your practice ON it. It's a phrase some coaches use. But that very idea, of using this mindset for EVERYTHING - of always looking for the most efficient, optimal option, whatever you're doing - will help solidify it FASTER.

Remember, neurons that FIRE together, WIRE together.

And as this is a process, the more you do this for anything, the faster you make this thought process a habit, and the more easy it becomes to do. And in moments of stress and panic, if you make this your go to - the path of least resistance, your automatic reaction... You'll make it impossible for you NOT to use this when you need it most.

I've spoken to professional sports teams and corporates about this. Some of the largest teams in the world, indeed.

And though you may argue that in a game where milliseconds means the difference between coming first or second, on million dollar contracts, on CHAMPIONSHIPS... I'd say that by focusing on something which saves you those precious milliseconds and makes you the SMARTEST player on the pitch, court, or felt, you give yourself the best chance of succeeding.

Before I got ill, I used to play basketball. I wasn't the best. I wasn't the most athletic. But I was decent. And I was a great shooter.

The thing is, I didn't used to play or think *smart* back then. Though I was by no means going pro (even though, like any kid, I'd dream of playing in the NBA), I was decent in my league. But the amount of hours I put into training - I used to train as much as the kids who would turn out to be professionals did during school, because I just loved the game. But I could have been so much better if I'd taken a step back and THOUGHT more about how I used my time, rather than just practicing.

My shot was great. But though I used to practice spot up shots, and even shoot as high a percentage there as a division 1, NCAA college player from the 3 point line, I only ever got 1 or 2 shots up PER GAME because I'd never actually think about THAT when practicing.

I guess the young me didn't really care so much. I loved just getting better at the game, seeing myself get better, and just playing against friends.

But in the end, if I had just spent 10 or 20 minutes on YouTube looking at the drills professionals use to shoot better in game, and implemented that into practice (when I was practicing anyways), I would have gotten so much better.

Hell, I never used to WATCH basketball, despite spending upwards of 20 hours a week training for it! A bit of that was because I was a kid, in Australia, where basketball isn't on free to air TV. But had I done so, I would have been a MUCH better player than I am now.

There's a difference between active learning, and engagement, and watching highlights.

This thought process, is EXTREMELY powerful, and makes every second you put into training, on your business, or in professional development 10x faster.

if you start taking a step back and asking yourself, “How often does Lebron use that little hesitation do to give him an extra step that LEADS to his amazing passing off screens,” or “Why does Danny Green wait for defenders to lock into dangerous threats on offence to start his sneaky cuts that lead to open corner 3s,” or “How that amazing screen, and cut by a shooter opened up the lane for that AMAZING dunk” - every second you **WATCH** basketball will equate to a second you’re getting better **AT** it.

When I came out of chemo and radiation and a bone marrow transplant, and lost all my athleticism to both not being able to exercise and the side effects of treatment, I actually played better than I used to because I was THINKING about the game better. I’d average around 10 points, and importantly, 3 - 4 assists - and even scored 20 points one game in 15-20 minutes of gametime (with running clocks, and against a state level player), because I was a step ahead of everyone now.

It doesn’t take huge amounts of “talent” or “basketball IQ” to become the smartest player on the court either. Sure, IQ helps. But as I said before, the difference between the IQ of a genius and a regular joe, is only that you can juggle one extra thing in your mind (you go from being able to do 5 things simultaneously to 6).

If you’re already, in the background, questioning every single play that goes on, thinking about where you’ll get open in the offence, how your play off the ball will help your team score, and how the opposition is defending actions - you’re thinking of 1 less thing when you’re taking a shot, or playing defence. You’re a STEP ahead.

Now this isn’t just some kid who’s played high school basketball (for a national champion team though, I might add).

I’ve used this mentality to make an over 6 figure profit playing poker in my spare time, in 3 years.

I’ve played against some of the world’s best and held my own - both live, where stress and stakes are higher - and online, where the best technical players, with the best strategies, play.

The game of poker is one of luck in the short run. But if your strategy is better than an opponent’s, or a player pool, and your ability to deduce what’s going on in a hand quickly is too, then if you play against them enough, you’re virtually guaranteed to make a profit.

It seems super complex. And it IS at the highest levels. But in all honesty, you don’t need to be a maths genius to be a good poker player. As long as you can roughly calculate basic fractions (like  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{3}$ ,  $\frac{2}{3}$ ), which anyone can after a bit of practice, you’ll be fine.

What makes poker HARD though is not only the work that other players put in to think at a higher level than you, but that you have to calculate your risk:versus reward, assess your opponent and estimate their propensity to bluff or be conservative, and, depending what style of poker you’re playing, other factors too within 30 seconds.

You have to calculate whether your investment to potentially win a hand is profitable. Or whether your opponent has enough vulnerable, not-so-great hands for you to be likely to get them to fold a better hand via a bluff. Or calculate the maximum amount you can get them to pay you off if they have a worse hand.

All in that tiny time frame.

You have to do this for 8 - 12 hours at a time. For up to a week, in the longest tournaments.

Indeed, in a tournament, 1 mistake could knock you out.

THAT'S where poker is hard.

The reason why I was successful at poker - why I'll always have an income source from playing a game I love - is for 2 main reasons.

1. I worked just as hard OFF the 'felt' (poker table) as I did playing it. Unlike the young, basketballer version of me. And
2. I also kept my mind focused on *playing well in the long run*. Something you need to do not just in poker, but also, in life.

The first, I could write a whole book about in and of itself. Though I actually encourage most people to NOT play poker - it's not THAT profitable a game unless you're one of the top 10 players in the world or take big risks.

But even as more training sites and online videos have come in making the overall player field, and making money playing this game tougher than ever before, nowhere near as many people work on their game as much as they play it. So you can still eke out a profit, if you play smart, and play enough.

When I was playing \$200 no limit (NL) ZOOM tables on Pokerstars, and taking shots at \$500NL - the highest stakes in the game - I excelled most. It's a non-traditional form of poker where you don't get to make as many player specific reads, as you'd play a bunch of new people every hand you played (not always the case at the higher stakes, but I digress).

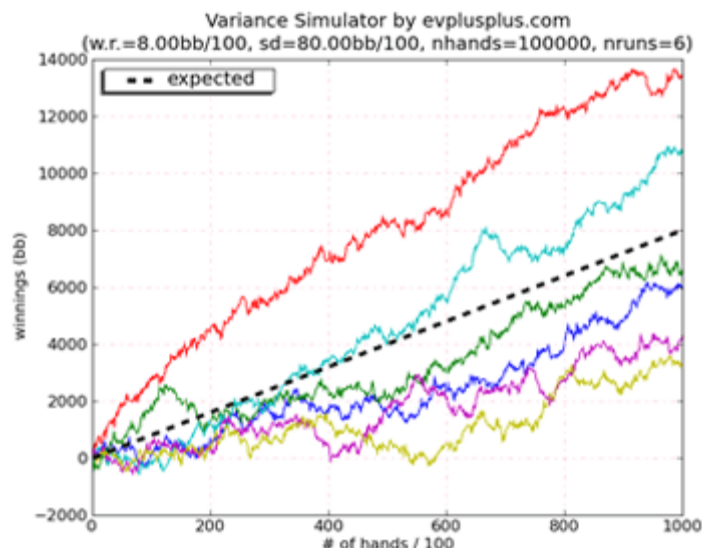
So looking at major hands I played, and objectively looking at general population tendencies, as well as making notes on players I saw regularly, and looking at what they often did against me and other players, led to me creating a strategy where I was guaranteed to win. At my peak, I was making over \$100/hour having fun on my laptop or computer, at home.

The first aspect, or working off the felt, and improving your mindset, habits and actions, I'd talked about above. You can apply this to competitive scenarios, but also when trying to improve yourself or make yourself more efficient or active.

But the second aspect - of looking at things in the long run - is just as important to succeeding. Controlling your **EMOTIONAL** state of mind, and figuring THAT out is arguably just as important, and made more easy, by thinking in this rational, progressive way. Thus, if you're focused on improvement in the long run, you're more likely to succeed.

In poker... Luck ensures that on a good day, anyone can win.

You have to put in volume, or play a large amount, to guarantee yourself a win, statistically speaking. The more you play, the more likely you are to turn a profit.



A series of possible outcomes from playing a certain number of hands, for a decent to pretty good player.

But in a short run, if we somehow had a way to mitigate that effect of luck (there are ways that researchers have done this [when testing artificial intelligence against some of the world's best poker players](#)), on good days, you could be on your game, making perfect decisions.

To be a good poker player though, you have to maintain this over a long time.

And maintaining a good habit is what many people struggle with most.

But if you think of things through a process, you make that habit one that lasts.

It's not easy. It's important to remember, we're still human, after all.

But even when mistakes are made in the short term, as long as we keep focusing on the long term outcomes, we *will* continue a trajectory towards a net profit. Whether we're talking poker, or life.

## Getting your Emotions on Your Side.

The whole process I talk about, could arguably be seen as tempering your emotions. It's ultimately the same thing, by taking a step back, you decrease your emotional reactivity, and blood flow to limbic, emotional centres and allow yourself to be more logical.

But from there, making the choice to pick the path that leads to the happiest and healthiest version of yourself is where you get to truly *control* your emotions.

Your emotional reactions.

Look at it however you want. Deceiving, or hacking your own mind. Being more objective. Becoming wiser. In the end, YOU'RE in control. And when you control this emotion, you spend less time lingering in failure, more time learning from it, and you can indeed get to a point where you can reset your set points, when depressed or anxious, to become happier.

By doing this in a systematic manner, we increase the chances of us achieving this. Gratitude is shown to improve depression outcomes significantly more than positivity - why? [Because with gratitude, you actually force yourself to FIND SOMETHING TO BE POSITIVE ABOUT.](#)

Ultimately, this process outlines HOW to find something to feel grateful for. Remembering we're human ensures that you don't just ignore things you should deal with such as fear, failure or sadness. This humility and acknowledgement of our own humanity ensures that we don't become arrogant from something like this, and instead, learn from things.

## Making your emotions work FOR YOU

If you're in that basketball game, down by 4 points, with 30 seconds left, it's only natural to feel the fear of failure. But if you take that step back, you'll realise you'll always have a second way of looking at things. Worrying about things like that doesn't make sense, if you ask yourself why you're doing it. All it does is make you doubt yourself more, and make you more likely to hesitate. It encumbers the smoothness of your shot. Allows the defence an extra second to catch up to you, and decreases the likelihood that your shot goes down.

If you're an NBA player, someone who's practiced your craft - whatever that is - you'll be at stage 4 of that competency model - unconscious competence - when you don't need to *think* to make the right play, to take a shot properly, and sink it.

Doubt and worry at this stage, I'd go so far as to say hoping or praying that the shot goes in (it inherently implies you're doubtful it will, but on a more scientific level, hoping in and of itself IS a thought process) is the only thing that can mess you up.

[Telling yourself not to think is a guaranteed way to get yourself thinking.](#) This is shown, scientifically. For most people, it leads to your mind racing, I'd say. You can't just 'stop worrying.'

But if you instead decided to focus on something else to think about, you give yourself more of a chance of succeeding. Distraction therapy is used to control pain, but less likely to work, and indeed, more likely to result in less focus when performing actions.

Avoiding the fear of failure, by not thinking about it, is thus, not as likely to work.

Chanting mantras is actually shown to [increase performance in attentional tasks, and improve academic performance.](#) Visualisation and mantras are [shown to increase athletic performance too.](#) I'm sure that as Kobe and Michael Jordan rise to take shots, they're whispering swish in their minds.

But to get the best results, you need to practice how you play.

As mentioned above, practice is what reinforces cortical maps that you've programmed through practice for success. So whatever you do in practice, whether it be rewarding yourself with a silent "YES" as you make a shot in basketball, with a nod if you're applying a mathematical formula to solve a problem when practicing for an exam, or by giving yourself a 'self-five' as you walk out of a successful business negotiation - if you reaffirm yourself BEFORE GOING IN, and reaffirm yourself in the same way going out, you make it more

likely you'll apply that same process, or action in both this, and future stressful scenarios. You'll make yourself more likely to hit that shot, and be successful at whatever it is you're trying to do.

The "Mamba mentality," or "killer instinct" comes naturally. But there's NO REASON it can't be taught too.

Now you've mastered YOUR emotions, you can master OTHERS' too.

And when you master your own emotions, you free up yet another one of those 5-6 things you juggle in your mind and can focus on how you can manipulate others' emotions.

Once you can control yourself, you can then focus on how you can manipulate others to be able to control them better.

People believe that empathy can't be taught. To an extent, this is true. But when you become more self aware, and attuned to your own feelings, you're more able to understand the feelings of others. Deducing how they may be feeling, is also something you can teach by taking a step back and evaluating responses to those scenarios from their perspectives. I've literally described walking a mile in their shoes. It's central to this whole mentality. And it's proven to be the case too - as people who were able to visualise more, something self distancing can do, were [more prone to understanding the experience of others](#).

And when you hit that level, yes, you'll be able to sense when someone's made a mistake, or intimidated by you, to allow yourself to get into their heads and "own" them, and help reduce their chance of making correct decisions while you play. In something like sports, I'd encourage that. Mentality is, in my opinion, the most interesting part of the game.

But when you do understand yourself, you're also more likely to understand those you care about. Your teammates, colleagues, and loved ones. And you'll know what they need to hear to bring them up too.

Making learning from failure your norm;

Of course, we must remember that the final shot in any basketball game, just like risky plays in poker that you HAVE to make to profit most (by coming top 3) in a tournament, and the act of executing, after planning so long in negotiations, when securing deals, or asking that girl you've had a crush on for a while, doesn't always work.

Failure will happen. It can't be avoided. Learning from that failure is one thing we make ourselves prone to do by adapting this mindset.

But before that, focus on if we can correct that mistake, or miss first. If you do miss that shot, instead of putting your head down, your mind will focus on what you can do to win if you apply this mentality first.

Yes your odds may have gone down from 40% to 20% to win the game... but in the end, that's still a *chance*.

Focus on what you CAN do rather than what you can't.

If you start using this process in day to day life, in practice, at work, or whatever you're trying to do now, you'll be doing that automatically by the time you hit game 7 of the playoffs. If you're a coach, a manager, a leader - instill this into your team, so they don't need you to tell them this when that time comes.

In the end, [motivation works best when it comes FROM YOU.](#)

But you can motivate those around you, if you can put yourself in their shoes, and help them become the best versions of them. The amazing thing about a team is that if multiple people are doing this together - then at least one of you - when times are tough, will know exactly what to say to lift each-other up.

When looking back at a loss, it is important that we examine why we did lose, so in the future, we reduce the chances of it happening again. But it's also important that we don't ruminate.

Lingering over defeats we can't help, is sometimes something we can't help.

We're human after all.

But after a while of feeling bad, you do heal. Taking a step back, and thinking about other ways we can deal with it is one way we can facilitate this. But sometimes we need help. I talk about how I've dealt with loss later on in this book.

But if you continue to apply these things in this process, you give yourself the best chance of succeeding.

I've chosen the analogy of a basketball game throughout this piece. But life is filled with time sensitive challenges. As I said, applying this mentality in day to day life leads to you being more likely to use it when you need it most. So start doing it now.

When thinking of what you need to do next... remember to

- 1) Take a step back
- 2) Question all your doubts, fears, and obstacles, and evaluating what path is best for you.
- 3) Repeat this, and reinforce your beliefs and
- 4) Reward yourself when you succeed, and focus on learning, and the long run, when you don't

## True mastery - Turning Fear into Motivation.

When you're going into an exam... you can't help but stress. What if you hadn't covered everything? What happens if you fail? ***What if? What if? What if?***

But take a step back from the stress and pain. Physically pull yourself away if you have to. And ask yourself what that's accomplishing. In truth... all it does is make you anxious, more likely to panic, and less likely to succeed, as your brain enters a suboptimal fight or flight response.

While stress is something that does enhance memory formation, in processing new pieces of information (though this memory formation is thought to be optimised towards future flight or flight responses, as opposed to cognitive memory), [it reduces its effects, and is shown to reduce exam performance.](#)

Telling someone not to worry is the easiest way to make someone worry.

Instead focus your energy on something that's productive.

Revise your notes. If you find yourself catastrophizing and imagining how everything could go wrong, try and chant them out loud - which, as shown above, actually is shown to improve academic performance while also distracting yourself, something that also works well in moments of acute anxiety. Meditation, focusing on now, basically, mindfulness, is also shown to [reduce stress, and induce more positive responses.](#)

But the next level of mastering your emotions is to focus the angst, and the adrenaline that stress does induce, into something *constructive*. We can't help but feel fear. But if we can divert it to something constructive, we make fear work for us.

A complex array of neurotransmitters are responsible for fear and anxiety. But [stress also releases adrenaline.](#) And *motivation* when timed right can improve stress responses, [and induce the release of adrenaline.](#) When people tell you they're 'pumped up' from a song, they're not lying. Music is a stimulant. There's a reason why music marathon runners are banned from listening to it. [It also literally induces adrenaline release,](#) which in turn, increases blood flow to your brain and heart.

And when you're stressed already, the [threshold required to release more adrenaline is lowered.](#) It becomes easier to pump yourself up.

Hell, if you were about to get open heart surgery, wouldn't you rather be up writing a book, rather than waking up in sweats, fearing the worst?

If you, over time, do start processing fear in this way, you can use it to your advantage too. THAT'S when you have TRUE control of your emotions.

This is how you can master your emotions and make your primitive brain work for you through your logical self.

The best way to do it is to START NOW.



Look at every single interaction as a chance to grow. Take a step back, and gamify your life. Though current research into this space focuses on how literal gamification through rewards and badges can improve the adaptation of wellness interventions and psychological ones too, by always taking a step back, you immediately give yourself more control of your life.

You take things into your own hands. You solidify those cortical maps that lead to you responding to scenarios more efficiently, and you help yourself become the strongest, best version of yourself.

And if you can do this. You give yourself the best chance of being the best version of YOU.

I simply don't have time to write these chapters out as much as I'd like to. But the next few chapters are centered around how to deal with common challenges that I've faced, and that you may too. From how to hack your own mind to make losing weight easy, to being more happy with yourself, to getting through loss.. Something I hope my own family doesn't have to apply in regards to me anytime soon.

It won't be as flash as the final copy will (remember, this is a draft after all). It'll likely be similar to pieces you may have seen me written before, on my blog - [NikhilAutar.com](http://NikhilAutar.com) - personal stories which lead into the message, and science.

Either way, I hope it helps.

## Chapter 5: Finding Self Contentment.

I was diagnosed with [leukemia](#) at 17 and given a 10, maybe 20 percent, chance of living.

And I was devastated... as any human being would be. But after a while I started to dislike that feeling.

The constant [depression](#).

The tears.

The gut-clenching dread.

I wanted this to all be over. I wanted a way out of the hole that I'd found myself in. But with chemotherapy, uncertainty, and probable death in my future, there wasn't much to really look forward to.

In the end, what ended up helping me most wasn't this spark of inspiration or willpower or bravery after watching some inspiring talk or reading some book. The words of everyone around me felt hollow.

What did they know about what I was going through, after all? I was 17, and had just been told I probably wouldn't live to see 22.

What *really* helped me that simple little thought process I've talked about this whole book, after just getting sick of all that angst.

I decided to take a step back and ask myself "Why not take a step back and looked at what had happened to me, as if it had happened to someone else."

From there I guess I saw everything that had happened to me objectively. So I could finally question everything that was going on and more importantly, how I was dealing with it.

And I did that through asking *why*. Why was I feeling that way?

There was no answer. In the end I realized I had what I had. Though it may suck, I couldn't go back in time and change what had happened. I couldn't take away my [cancer](#).

So, what was my anger and frustration accomplishing? Nothing. Other than making me feel *worse* about everything.

Why was I feeling that way then? In the end, it was coming from me, MY BRAIN.

Why was I doing that to myself?

I didn't have an answer for that.



Photo credit: Analia Paino

But that question alone made me realize one thing that stays with me to this day. Because if all of that was coming from me, my brain, my mind... that meant I could control that too.

In the end, we will *a/ways* have the final say on how we deal with things. At the very least, we'll *a/ways* have a second way of looking at things.

But we're only human, right? And with months to years of chemo, pain, treatment — all of which is likely leading to me dying anyway — there wasn't much to look forward to, right?

So I questioned those fears and doubts, too.

Again, one question got me through that — Why? Why was I thinking I was cursed for being diagnosed so young?

My doctor's words as this happened rang through my head as I heard this. When I was diagnosed he told me, "The good news is, you're 17 and you have leukemia, but the bad news is, you're 17 and you have leukemia."

Good news? "Good news? Really dude!" I remember thinking for a while after that. But when I thought about it, being diagnosed young meant I could get the optimal treatment — I could recover faster. I didn't have a job or a family or kids to worry about. Indeed, I had one right there beside me the whole way!

What I once thought was a curse turned out to be a blessing. But why was I so afraid?

I was looking at chemo as a thing that brings pain and misery. And it would. And that sucked.

But wasn't it also a medicine? The very thing that could get me out of this? Indeed, my doctors wouldn't be putting me through this if they didn't think it could work. Why was I so pissed off, afraid and depressed?

In the end, I was worrying about all these things I couldn't control. And that worry and stress were only hurting me more.

From stepping back and looking at my situation objectively I could see the only logical thing to do was to focus on the things I could control.

My health.

My actions.

My happiness.

Because what this has taught me is you will always have a second (better way) of looking at things. Always.

It's not easy to see that straight away. Definitely not if you're overwhelmed and in the midst of it. Depression makes that harder, too.

But if you can take a step back, talk about it with someone, and just ask, "Why?" You can get yourself through just about anything and become the happiest, most successful version of yourself.

It doesn't take courage. I wasn't brave or inspiring in my "battle" (in truth, it was a beating) with cancer.

I cried, I wailed for it to be over. I still do sometimes. (Beating cancer isn't always the end of pain for many survivors. Depression came, too. It's something I face, and I write about it here [as well as on my own blog](#)). But I kept in mind these things — what it was all for — and by doing that I saw something good in the darkest days of my life.

You don't need some superhuman willpower or positivity, either. Because in the end, if you can take that step back, and ask why... if you can help your friends and family do the same... then it becomes only logical. It only makes sense to take the path that leaves you most well-off.

And I hope what I've said can help you do this.

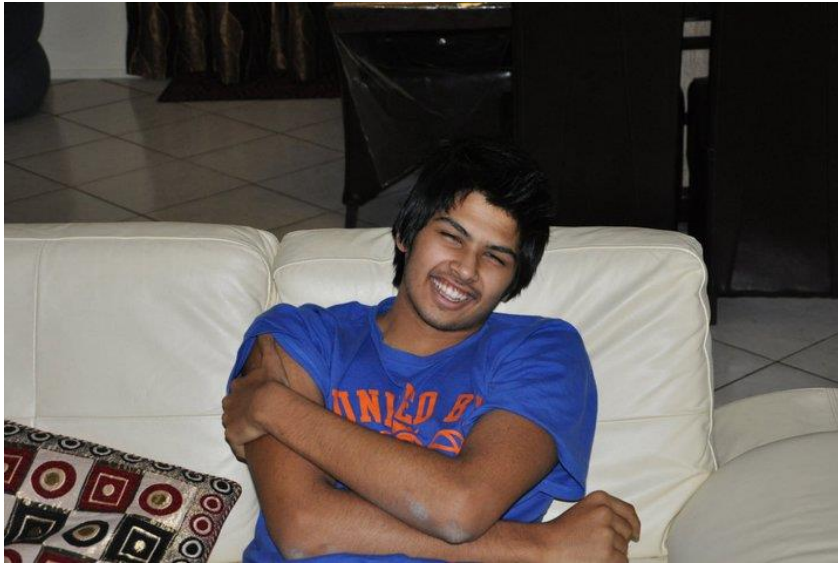


Photo credit: Analia Paino. Sign up to my email list to get my latest blog as soon as it comes out!

One place where I think I've done this after cancer, against something which some of you may be feeling (whether you've had cancer or not), is with my social anxiety post-treatment.

You see, before cancer (not to brag or anything) I was quite a hunk (well, at least I thought I was). I wasn't too fussy about how I looked but was a little, just as much as any awkward teen is. But I was fit. Very fit. I used to train for basketball almost every morning before class, and during breaks, and abide by a strict weight training regimen on top of that too.

But after treatment ravaged my body, I was left bloated out of my mind, unable to jump an inch, yet alone run. I'd lost a huge part of me. I looked like this. And it sucked.



Before.

After.



Without even realizing it, I began using my health as an excuse not to go out. Whenever I did, the glances from people would bore into me, asking questions as to why I had such horrendous features, and when I tried to walk around the suburbs and try to run again, I'd puff out after less than a football field.



As I started my medical degree, I'd made friends but didn't want to go out for fun or to events. I even stopped going out to see old friends at all, worried about what they were thinking. And that made life so much worse.

One day though, I sat down, took a step back and asked, "Why am I feeling this way?"

After a few days of thinking about it, I realized I was afraid. Not of chemo, or radiation or bone marrow transplants and other things that could kill me this time, but from other peoples' *thoughts* about me.

It already seemed ludicrous to me at that point. But when I questioned it, I found no answer as to why I should care so much about other peoples opinions about me. Because:

- (a) Most people aren't thinking anything bad of me at all. People have to look somewhere when they walked, and if they happened to look at me, most people wouldn't think anything nefarious so much as to walk on. Many would smile. Most would smile back I'd say.
- (b) Why was I caring so much? If they were judging me, they'd be pretty shallow, inconsiderate people who I really wouldn't like to be friends with. Why do we all — whether we have scars or not — try so hard to impress people we don't even like for that matter? Why not instead, focus on what *we'd like to do*. On the things that make *us* happy?

Now that was the first step. It wasn't like I came up with this new philosophy and started becoming this happy #YOLO optimist in one day.

It takes time to form a new habit, or thought process no matter what.

I started small, by first starting to smile at people (most of the time, they *did* smile back) on my walks and jogs, then not shying away from asking people for directions at the university or hospital when I was lost or asking the workers at the groceries store instead of trying to find everything on my own. Small steps, that I'd slowly start rewarding myself more and more for accomplishing. Steps that led me closer and closer to making this a habit, my norm.

After a while, I did finally reach a point where I could walk around and not care. I was happy with myself. Truly, and honestly.

Now I'm very open about my journey but can also do talks, in front of thousands or just a few, about how I deal with things.

Indeed, I'm the most confident version of myself.

Of course, I'm not TOTALLY shameless, I still get shy and don't do things sometimes. But I no longer feel crappy about myself. And ultimately, that's what matters most.



Photo credit: Analia Paino

But most importantly, this helped me become the most *happy* version of myself. And I hope this helps you feel happier about yourself, too.



## Chapter 6: Losing Weight and Getting Fit is EASY

I've been on prednisone, a steroid drug that unfortunately, eats away at your muscle, and is rigged to make you eat more and get fat too. People frequently put on dozens of pounds when on this for a few weeks. I've been on this for 7.5 of the last 8 years.

On top of this, health has gotten in the way of my exercise. Where I used to shoot hoops 6 days a week, for years, chronic cramping and spasticity has limited my ability to roll in bed without debilitating pain, yet alone do much more.

But despite this, I've maintained a healthy weight for a while now. After my first transplant, where I put on over 30kg, >65lb, and then after a right rib resection left me bedbound for months, I lost over 20kg again.

Ask anyone who's been on prednisone for more than a week. It sucks. It's so hard to stop craving food, and so hard to lose weight afterwards.

To be honest though... losing this weight wasn't really that hard at all. I didn't have to diet, or do crazy amounts of exercise. What I did was change MY MINDSET about food and exercise... And THAT is what's helped me lose all this weight, and keep it off, all this time.

The reason why there's not much great literature on motivation and mindset change when it comes to losing weight is because (a) It isn't a psychiatric disorder that warrants things like CBT (which isn't too effective in weight loss in any case) and (b) If someone tried to make an app that helped people lose weight, they'd lose money everytime they succeeded.

Jenny Craig, and other diet regimes, have a bit of evidence behind them. But they [only produce 5% higher rates of weight loss](#) compared to non treatment groups or food counseling sessions. And 5% was the highest performer of major commercial brands (Jenny Craig took this honour).

Everyone talks about how they can't stay on a diet and how they can't find the time to do exercise... They talk about how hard it is to make changes in their life and how they just don't have the willpower or ability to be healthier people. But even while on 50mg of prednisone, a corticosteroid (which increases your appetite, screw around with your hormones and energy metabolism, and eat away at muscles), I didn't find it too hard. You wanna know why?

**Because all I did to become a healthier person was change my MINDSET.**

By understanding how my brain, its rewards pathways, and its neuroplasticity, as well as how my body processed foods, I was able to hack this, in an evidence based, scientifically guided manner, to make this 'tough' journey, as easy as possible on me.

It didn't require "willpower", "bravery", or even long bursts of commitment. By hacking my mentality, I made healthy habits just that – a habit. And in truth – it was EASY.

Doctors all tell us that weight loss requires a lifestyle change, rather than drastic, quick-fix 12-day-detox/Biggest Loser boot camp solutions. And they're right. You should look to lose weight AND keep it off. It'll [help you with heart problems](#), lower your [chances of diabetes](#), reduces your [risk of cancer](#) and also - a healthy diet can make you feel *better*, more energetic than ever before.

But the words "lifestyle change" imply that it's hard, that it requires constant effort and struggle to do, and that's a big reason why people aren't willing to make that change.

Eating the right foods, and getting some exercise on a continuous basis IS vital to weight loss. But what's even more important is if you can *maintain* that way of living.

*And that's where your mind comes into the picture.*

A few months ago, I was sitting at around 96, sometimes 97kg. I was trying everything to get fit and lose weight. I started juicing, cutting carbs out of my diet and went out, trying to run, get back into my old sprint training and back into the weights. And that was working - as it would for anyone - for a few weeks at a time.



Before: 97kg - I know, it's the same picture. But to be fair, they're great fish.

But with my low immunity putting me into hospital with infections every few months, with my treatments lowering my blood counts, I kept getting sent back to where I began from over and over again... and it was *frustrating as hell*. I wanted to lose weight and become as fit as I was before I got sick... I wanted to see results... but they just weren't coming.

But after a while of this, I took a step back and saw that I was going through a cycle over and over again. It's the same cycle a lot of fad-dieters, or others wanting to lose weight, go through. I wanted results and I wanted them NOW. But they weren't coming.

So I changed the way I looked at getting healthy.

I changed my mindset... how I viewed my journey to come.  
And the same thing that helped me beat cancer helped me get fit.

You don't need huge "willpower" to do it. All it takes are a few small changes in how you view things.



~4 months later, on the same dose of steroids... I lose weight... AND the fish got bigger.

So what exactly did I do?

# 1 - I Reminded Myself that it Would  
Take Time

-> This is one of the most important realisations you've gotta make. No matter how much we want it to, results don't come in a few days. But they do come.

The trick is to not only remind yourself of this – but to *keep looking at the big picture, on your entire journey* – as this will make maintaining changes easier to accomplish. Instead of falling down in a heap if you can't resist that desert at a party, you'll



remind yourself that the amount of times you had been good, and that in the long run, you were on the right path.

That lessened burden alone will make you SO much less likely to quit. But also key is to give yourself a LONG TERM GOAL. Something to strive to. Your mind is [rigged to release more and more dopamine the closer and closer you get to one,](#) meaning over time, this becomes EASIER to accomplish.

The science only helped me further believe, hell, it made me KNOW I could do it, but I mean it only made sense... I was only beginning my journey to get healthy - I was starting from scratch. It would take time to get to where I wanted to go. It wouldn't happen overnight.

But that wasn't a bad thing. I mean, it's simple statistics. If I did things generally right, over a long period of time, I'd get to where I wanted to be. And by looking at it this way, I wasn't forcing myself into doing something I didn't want to - I was ALLOWING MYSELF TO BE HUMAN. knew I wouldn't give up, or worry, or hate myself if I had a few slip-ups on the way either.

That's exactly how you should look at weight loss, or any goal for that matter. It'll give you the best chance of getting there (and of staying happy on the way too). And by doing things in this way, you guarantee you'll get there. Now, it's only a matter of time.

## **#2 - I Took A Step Back, and Made SMALL Changes To How I LOOKED At Food**

-> Instead of making huge, drastic changes to my diet, or instead of starving myself, I

1. Took a step back, and
2. Questioned my current habits, until I saw
3. An alternative perspective, or way of looking at things, that would leave me healthiest

The simple act of self distancing is shown to reduce blood flow to emotional centres, and regions of your brain that reference yourself, allowing you to be objective. This is shown to improve decision making. But from this step back, you also are able to see all your options more clearly. From here - choosing to start looking at the path that leaves you happiest and healthiest not only just makes *sense*, it also comes FROM YOU. Don't just read how I did it - examine yourself from this perspective yourself - and you'll get the person most likely to motivate you on your side - YOU.

Motivation works best when it's [Centered Around You - check out that app I'm working on](#) to not only walk you through this process, but also to improve medicine and research as a whole!

## **Hacking your Stomach (with Neuroplasticity + Biology) - Reducing Portion sizes. SLOWLY:**

When trying to reduce how much I ate - I realised that, especially with foods I liked, I was just gulping down food down by the spoonful. But in truth... I wasn't really taking the time to *savour* them. And the first 5, 10, maybe 15 spoonfuls or bites were most enjoyable. The last few... even with my favourite foods, well, to be honest, I was really only trying to finish off what was left.

To change that I made small gradual reductions to my portion sizes. I started savouring my meals and taking time with them. [It's shown that this improves satisfaction with meals, and makes you full with less food](#), as ghrelin - the satiety (full) hormone, has more time to take effect. It's seen at 20% higher rates, and resulted in 25% calorie consumption alone.

Once I realised I was full, I'd just leave it, put it in the fridge or throw it out, and *next time take out less*.

Over time... the portions got smaller and smaller. When going out... if I didn't really feel like finishing off my plate, I'd just leave it and ask if anyone else wanted a few bites. I was brought up on the whole "*Finish your plate, there are children in Africa who'd KILL to have what you've gotten!*" sort of mentality... and it's true. We waste tremendous amounts of food, and do need to respect it more. But why was I destroying my veins, my health, my vitality to assuage this preconception, when I could instead just take out a few less spoons, order a medium (and in time, a small) meal instead of a large one, and pack away good meals for breakfast or lunch the next day, and feel better for it?



Your stomach usually has a capacity of 200mL, but can stretch to hold up to 1L in most humans, by relaxing smooth muscle cells which comprise most of its wall. Over time, however, if not stretched to larger limits, the stomach loses the number of smooth muscle cells, and pacemaker cells (those which cause coordinated digestive contractions), leading to lowered capacity to relax. Furthermore, levels of neurons which release nitrous oxide, which promotes relaxation of smooth muscles, also reduces in patients who have lost weight recently. So over a period of a few weeks, slow, sustainable reduction in meal sizes will cause you to lose the ability to eat larger meals over time!

This is demonstrable through calorie restriction being imposed on obese patients. [Treated people saw a 27% reduction in stomach size, in addition to a 9.1kg weight loss in 4 weeks](#). Men who ate larger meals [showed resistance to weight loss change](#), despite being recommended similar diet interventions by doctors to those who ate less.

It's interesting to note that even after a while of this kind of fasting, even after overconsuming, [average stomach stretchability did not return back to normal levels](#), meaning you'll have the ability to have the occasional splurge without starting back at square 1 again.

But key to all of this working is *the neuroplasticity of your mind*. It's widely conceived that you need huge willpower to resist the temptation to continue eating. But the simple changes in the way you think about food described above is what ensures you'll get to that stage where your stomach adapts.

Neuroplasticity, as I explain further in chapter 3, is the brain's ability to form new cortical maps – linkages between series of neurons – in response to various scenarios. 'Neurons that fire together, wire together,' is the basic principle on which this idea is built – so reminding yourself that

1. You like food, but hate that fatty, full feeling afterwards
2. You like food, but often shovel in the last few bites just for the sake of it. And that
3. You enjoy meals even more when you really take your time to savour the meal

for just a few days in a row, will start forming these cortical maps. In weeks, these cortical maps become so solidified and prolific – they become your *automatic response*. You won't have to think these things anymore, you'll already, subconsciously believe them. And though weeks of resisting temptation seems hard to do, because it

1. Is coming from YOU telling yourself these things, and
2. Because you've got a long term goal, which causes more dopamine to be released each step you take towards it –

it's actually quite easy to do. They're subtle, small changes to how you view food, but combined, they make a HUGE difference. It's the difference between going into a diet, hating life and having to exert significant willpower to control yourself, and doing this automatically.

And you know what? It worked. In January 2016, I could eat a whole pizza, and I'd go up for second servings when lamb curry was made at home. 5 months later, I can still do a half pizza... maybe more, but only when I feel like it. And I barely finish 3/4 of a plateful. That small change in mindset resulted in a huge reduction in my calorie intake per day. And it's a big reason why I've lost so much weight.

Note - that it took 5 months to lose 20kg. But it's been 3 years since I wrote the original blog where I posted this, and I still hover between 78 - 80kg to this day WITHOUT TRYING.

That's lifestyle change made easy.

## Making Healthier Choices:

Me - I'm a foodie. I like trying different things, new cuisines. And I like variety in my day to day life. I also like my meat, hate salads on their own (chemo's changed my taste a lot - I used to love the taste of lettuce... now it tastes like dirt at times) and I like eating carbs like bread or rice with meals. Who doesn't really?

With these simple changes, I was able to eat all these things and still lose weight. But I knew I could stand to benefit from eating healthier foods on average... so again, I took a step back, questioned my current habits, and made *small changes to my mindset on food*, which helped me eat more healthily too, without depriving myself of the pleasures of life.

Carbs... I did like them, but what I liked more was *what I was eating with them*. So I changed the portions around, added more fillings or curries (whatever I was eating at the time) and reduced the proportion of that to however many slices of bread or spoonfuls of rice I'd eat with them. Again, this happened over weeks, not instantly.

With salads, whose taste I couldn't stand post chemo, I started drizzling, sometimes dumping tasty dressings based in oils (luckily regular olive oil is good for you), and added things like cottage cheese or olives to make them tastier. Juicing, though it gets good vitamins and veggies/fruits into you, was too much of a hassle to do regularly, especially cleaning the damn things. So I started looking around for good fruit/vegetable juice mixes with no added sugar or preservatives and came across [this brand, which uses pressure instead of preservatives, and doesn't add sugar to the mix](#) and saves me time too. There's bound to be something similar in your location.

I liked variety in my diet, and that was good. So I picked cuisines to eat regularly that were easy to prepare, and tasted good and were still healthy for me - things like tacos or stir fries (which have good amounts of veggies, are easy to cook, low in carbs and have good, but not excessive amounts of meat) and I mastered them. They're like a staple to me now. And I don't hate eating unlike most people who diet - so I *maintain* this healthy lifestyle still, to this day.





I couldn't believe this came from Costco either when I first tried it. But I highly recommend it – their Kale/Sweet Potato/Quinoa cous cous salad.

## Taking out the Junk Food

To be honest, I haven't taken out all junk food. I probably eat junkfood once a fortnight now, still. How did I reduce the amount I ate though?

Well I mean I looked at junk food, from that step back, and asked why I used to have that crap so often...

I mean sure... KFC does taste good, and junk food in general is cheap and easy to prepare... But I hated that “fat”, “oily” feeling I had after eating a packet of chips, some chocolate or a burger or box of chicken from KFC.

I didn't cut junk out entirely, which many people do, instead I only got a few small bits and pieces from fast food places or fish n chip shops, every now and then, and had them alongside other, healthier stuff. KFC - I made sure I had that with these pre-made salads I found in Costco which complimented it perfectly. With the chocolates, and chips, instead of gulping down a handful or packs of tim-tams at a time and then feeling bad afterwards, I shared them around with other people, or scabbed a few chips or bites from friends instead of buying a full pack and feeling like I had to devour it. Those small changes made me eat healthier (and also saved me money too - sorry guys). I still got to enjoy the taste. But I sidestepped feeling crap.

They are easier to cook, I guess, and many people just don't have enough time to do the cooking - but those meal suggestions I made above really help with that. Another thing that makes cooking easier for me is marinating meats and eating them with salad or veggies or a good slice of cheese (which acts as a side dish for me - I love block cheese and it's high in proteins too so it makes you fuller quicker). I marinate a huge amount of meat in tandoori paste, or honey soy dressing - whatever I feel like - leave it over a few days (the longer it marinates, the better it tastes) and cook it in meals with [this simple frier/grill](#) which only requires me to flip once and makes meat really tender too. It's done quickly. It's

quicker than a drive out to the closest McDonalds, and takes only a few flips in total to make it.

These small changes to how I viewed eating, small changes to my mentality, was all it took to improve my diet drastically. I haven't cut anything out, I'm not hating myself and making myself less likely to succeed by following strict diets and better meals is a MAJOR reason why I've lost so much weight and why I'm so healthy right now too!

## Improving My Fitness/Exercise Habits:

When I started trying to get fit after my second transplant, a year ago, I told myself I was going to take it slow and build up from there. After my first transplant, I pushed straight into weights and basketball, I didn't even focus on getting any endurance back before doing so and in the end, it didn't help me get healthier... It just made me frustrated (because I wasn't improving much) and probably made me sicker overall too.

This time around though, I didn't have a relapse, and lower blood counts stopping me from improving. What I did have was excuses and laziness and self-consciousness about my abysmal fitness, which made me not train consistently, which made me frustrated that I wasn't getting fitter, which made me lose the will to get fit - initiating a huge cycle where I'd get motivated and exercise for a week or two and then stop, only to repeat it, again and again.

### *Taking that First Step.*

Well, changing how I looked at things helped me get more consistent in my training. Motivating yourself to get off your bum and start is the hardest thing to do when exercising. But by changing your perspective on exercise, from a thing that is painful and excruciating to do, to something that you can build up on - something that gives you more energy throughout the day - gets you over that initial burden of getting up and doing that first set.

Me... I suffer from chronic pain, and a myriad of autoimmune diseases, so pain is often unavoidable. And sometimes I HAVE to forgo exercise.

**Looking at your long term goals becomes really important here.** Remembering to focus on the fact that you will get there - in time - as long as you're doing the right things OVERALL, as opposed to expecting to beat your PB every session, ensures you won't give up when you face failure - instead, as you're prepared for these, you'll be picking yourself up.

It's when you have a bad, or disappointing workout that this patient way of thinking really helps. Instead of getting down and sad about it - you'll be ready to go the next day, because you'll know for that 1 bad workout, you'll have 5 other good ones, and you're still be heading in the right direction.



*Another great tip – do something FUN! You’re much more likely to commit, and form good habits, if you make yourself accountable. So get a gym buddy, or join a team! 3/4 adults played sport growing up, but only 1/5 play as adults. Why is that?*

### *Start Easy and Build Up From There*

When building up from scratch, which I’ve had to do plenty of times, looking in the long term REALLY helps.

In my case, and that of many other patients who read my blogs, treatments and concurrent infections would bring me back to starting position, walking and body weight exercises were excellent in building me up. I started with push-ups, squats and sit-ups in front of the TV. Those things gave a good burn and made me feel like I did something and gave good, constant improvements when I did them consistently too.

I didn’t just like walking for no reason, so I used my mind and my interests to my advantage and started walking down to the river with a rod in hand, looking at the tides, watching the small fish and how they moved, and getting good ideas and experience to improve my fishing. Basketball - my favourite sport - always keeps me motivated, and watching a good basketball video or movie would always get me up and ready to have a shoot around. You can use whatever passions you like. Cycling, rock climbing, diving, whatever you want to motivate you to keep you in the gym or in the pool or on the track.

Make exercise time valuable. I know many students find it hard to sit down and study - so download your lectures and put them onto your music player and go for a walk or run. Same thing goes for podcasts of your favourite radio shows, or just blasting your own music. Makes it easier and even fun to train - in fact, Jana Pittman, a classmate of mine does this to keep up with medicine and still train at an Olympic level.



*The power of incidental exercise doesn't just stop at boosting the calories you burn a day, but also extends to formulating strong, neuroplasticity-moulded, attitudes towards exercise. Each time you pick the stairs – you make yourself more likely to pick them next time!*

### *Don't Be Shy, Or Worry About What Others Think of You*

Taking that first step was hard for me. After chemotherapies, where I'd have to start from scratch, I'd always feel embarrassed and self-conscious at how little I could do, and also about how weird I'd look. You may feel the same way when someone racks up more weight than you can squat on the bench press, or when someone laps you in the pool or when someone blocks you on the basketball or volleyball court. Whenever I wanted to work out, I would always feel the stares of others on me and that stopped me from wanting to go out and get healthy in the first place. When you take a step back and see it in another way though, you'll see that you're stopping yourself from being the healthiest and happiest version of yourself because of what other people may be THINKING about you. I talked about that above, in the last chapter too. I hope it helps.

**Overall – losing weight and getting fit and healthy is NOT something hard. Often, the only thing standing in the way of you getting there is YOU and your mindset.**

**Getting your mind on your side isn't hard. And it makes the rest of the journey easy. I HIGHLY recommend you start now.**

Those fad diets and boot camps can help lose weight and they do work. But they're not easy to maintain – they're not for everyone. Using your mind to your advantage is the best thing you can do to help you get healthy.

Myself – I've gone down from 97kg in November last year to about 80kg now.

After this surgery, I'll be on aggressive risk factor management - IE - low, pretty much no saturated fat diets.

But I've already been doing this for weeks. And similarly... It's not too hard at all to do this.

The first week, I won't lie, it was hard. But I made sure that in that first week of just fish, no red meat or chicken, and no dairy or, of course, junk foods either, that I had the tastiest meals possible. Peanut butter - filled with good fat, with a high carb, low or no fat pancake (or dipped in tea) was breakfast. Lunch was a combination of tasty Indian curries with extra spice, and fish cooked how I liked them.

I had tacos filled to the brim with hot salsa and vegan mayo (trust me, vegan mayo tastes exactly like the real thing but without any saturated, bad fat). And after that week... I got used to it.

When I went to a friend's wedding, I didn't deprive myself. I ate a piece of chicken or two and celebrated with the groom and enjoyed. But it's been 4 weeks now. I'm not really missing it. And I know I can maintain this forever if I want. And I will.

You guys can do this to help yourselves become the *healthiest* versions of you too. I hope this makes that journey easier.

## Chapter 7 - Overcoming Chronic Pain

This has definitely been the hardest battle I've had to fight in the last few years.

As a side effect of my bone marrow transplant, I started developing these 'cramping' sensations in my abdomen, and calves, in 2013, 6 months after my most recent transplant. Over time, these cramps become more frequent. Anyone who's had a cramp, knows how much they suck.

I used to get them every night, and by 2015, I used to get them all over my body.

From my feet, to my buttocks, to my back, hands, neck and even forehead. Every muscle was impacted. Every night, I'd be glued to my chair, avoiding, being scared of even going to the bathroom, for hours at a time. I'd fear that any movement at night would lead to every fibre of calf muscle compressing all at once, sending stabs of pain that wouldn't stop until I managed to muster up the energy to stretch it out.

But somehow it got even worse.

Soon, these cramps, which my doctors couldn't explain, yet alone treat, were occurring all day. I'd spend WEEKS curled up in a ball, unable to move. And the depression that came as a result of that was even more debilitating.

Soon, pain became my life. My actions revolved around it. My thoughts were clogged up by it. Every second, I was thinking about it.

In 2016 I wanted to end it all. All I could see was pain, misery, and probably death on my side.

In 2017, I nearly did.

But in the end... I did get better.

When you have something like chronic pain... everyone around you has suggestions. Everyone suddenly becomes an expert. When you're already so drained, physically and emotionally, from the condition itself – being told about miracle cures and being sold things that 'WILL CURE IT ALL' is not only heartbreaking, when you find that measure after measure fails, it's depressing, in and of itself.

So I'm telling you straight up – this isn't a miracle cure.

I still have issues dealing with the sleep and fatigue I get from this chronic pain/cramping/fibromyalgic-like condition that I have (I've gotten much better at dealing with that through knowledge I gained from [literature reviews for my sleep and wellness startup](#) though - this isn't me being salesy, it's the honest truth). I still do get frustrated by how it limits me, at times (though I can ignore the fatigue as well, I know it's healthy to respond to REAL signs it needs rest).

Though I have used this thought process to make my pain 90x better, I still feel pain.

But my suffering because of it has decreased significantly.

And it wasn't even hard to do this. It didn't require an ounce of bravery, courage or willpower.

It did take time. But eventually, because I was prepared, I knew I could get there.

And today, I can, and do ignore pain as it comes on, automatically. Without willpower, or effort, or, as I talked about above, an ounce of bravery or courage. I hope it helps you do the same too. It may not. I highly recommend you see a pain team as well - as they'll be most able to deal with your individual pain (and they're often VERY good at dealing with it too. I wish I'd seen one years before. As it happened to be, I'd done what they'd suggested I do myself anyways).

Without further ado, I'll go on.

It took a few weeks to get there. But the key to this is that I had this long term goal in mind – **of getting to a point where my mind would automatically ignore the pain when it came on.**

I knew I could do this because of two things. 1) I was on duloxetine – an antidepressant – for a while 2 years ago, and that helped me, despite it not actually stopping the cramps which initiated my pain. That gave me self assurance.

While I was on it... the pain still happened, but it didn't affect me as much. This powerful evidence of this working – of me being able to ignore pain – in the past, really helped get through my head that I could indeed accomplish this. That I COULD ignore chronic pain, which really helped me stay on track.

But number (2) was more important... it was also reading about the science of chronic pain that solidified this belief and gave it backing. I looked at how greater connections between attentional centres and emotional ones sensitizes us to, and enhances the impact of pain via maladaptive, BAD neuroplasticity. I'll explain this more in a page or so.

I also read about neuroplasticity in general (the science of habit formation in particular), and the effects of positive reinforcement on strengthening mesolimbic (aka reward) pathways – which has numerous effects that makes a thought process or behaviour addictive, and hence, easier to maintain – from our amygdala (emotional centre), to the pre-frontal cortex (responsible for planning and attention) to our hippocampus (a vital part of memory).

By learning everything I could about these things, and combining my findings, I figured out how I could hack this process, via positive reinforcement, to make the journey to get to a stage where neuroplasticity would change my reaction to pain, easier.

So how did I do it?

1) I took a step back and look at the pain I was facing – when it was worst, when it was best etc. and wrote that down. I think most importantly, I **learned everything I could about chronic pain too.** Pain education is central to the success of pain therapy for a reason.

2) I saw that I could, and did ignore pain when I was feeling happy, when I was on that antidepressant (it didn't reduce the cramps themselves, but did help me ignore them). When I was able to attach less importance to a burst. I then latched on to that.



3) I knew that I could ignore it, and could focus on stuff that made me happy – and make that an automatic response, in a matter of weeks, as neuroplasticity could rewire my responses to pain.

Almost mantra like, instead of focusing on the pain once it occurred, I told myself “This is an aberrant, faulty signal that I shouldn’t be attaching significance to,” that “it would be over in seconds – minutes” that “getting annoyed by it, fretting over it happening again was only gonna make it worse” and told myself that “focusing on something else was more constructive – why not do that instead?”

and

4) I rewarded myself every time I ignored the pain. And I allowed myself to be human – acknowledge there would be times I’d fail along the way – but that in the long run, I would get there.

After a week, as I got better at this, I even started looking forward to cramps coming on as an opportunity to show myself I could do it. I’d addicted myself to getting better at doing this. It became easier to do.

After a month, my reward pathways kicked in and I didn’t have to keep rewarding myself – exponentially growing hits of dopamine surged through me as I got closer to my long term goal (another observed phenomenon that my research assured me would kick in).

In 5-6 weeks, I didn’t have to tell myself any of this at all. I was automatically ignoring chronic pain when it struck. IT DIDN’T EVEN TAKE WILLPOWER – or me reminding myself of those ‘mantras’-cum-realizations I did in step 1 and 2. Neuroplasticity made this a habit. One I maintain to this day.

## How Chronic Pain makes Pain worse. And how LEARNING about it makes it easier to overcome.

Central to this whole process was first off, understanding the beast I was fighting. To give myself a second way of looking at things that would lead me to that happy, healthy version of me, I had to understand what I needed to get there.

Chronic pain doesn’t [necessarily have to come with tissue damage](#), aka the activation of pain receptors and that subsequent firing. Indeed, a large part of pain is neuroplastic MALADAPTATION - bad neuroplastic changes which make you more sensitized, and hence susceptible to feeling worse pain! [Attentional centres fire more, and harder](#) in patients with chronic pain - when you’re feeling pain, it’s more likely to become the one thing you fixate on, and pay attention to. [Anticipation centres fire more rapidly, and are activated even when not in pain](#), making you [more anxious and fearful, ALL THE TIME](#). Your limbic centres fire more. People who are [depressed, and negative, have worse experiences of pain too, while on the other hand, positive emotions are associated with lower pain](#).

And the experience of pain, the fixation you have to it as a patient due to those attentional centres firing constantly, [makes you more prone to functional somatic syndromes](#). These make you fatigued, insomniac - it makes your heart race, your breath short, your appearance



haggard - the experience of sickness and the psychological impact of depression that many chronic pain patients also suffer makes it so much worse.

These truths all matched my reality.

But knowing these truths, also helped me match how I could get over them. [Educating someone on chronic pain, and how it works alone, reduces the impact and experience of pain](#). Because once you see that the main thing chronic pain does is make your brain more susceptible to pain... the ONLY LOGICAL THING TO DO is to not let it have so much power over you.

Because I knew it was an aberrant, wrong signal, I automatically started giving it less credence which is a LARGE part of why chronic pain is made worse. Your experience of illness, and fixation on it lessens once you realise its insidious nature.

It's easier said than done. It seems impossible when you're in the middle of it. But learning HOW pain works is how I was able to overcome it.

Because I knew that chronic pain increased firing of attentional centres... I also knew that not focusing on it would be one of my best bets. I had to undo years of neuroplastic changes to do this. But the good news was, [there's a therapy which makes disabling this, and also the anticipational, and fear, anxiety and catastrophizing centres of your brain](#), easier too - Distraction therapy.

By focusing on something else when the pain was going on, I'd be able to slowly undo those neuroplastic changes that had occurred to make pain so frustrating for me.

By doing this over and over, and rewarding myself with an internal self-five when I was able to ignore the pain, but reminding myself that it's all a long race - that I'd get there in the long run - when I had a burst I simply couldn't put out of my head, I strengthened those cortical maps that I knew would eventually become my norm, faster.

Positive thoughts, as opposed to negative ones, were also affected by pain. But though I couldn't fix depression overnight (looking at things in the long run has helped with that too), I knew I only had to distract myself, and do so by focusing on things that made me happy, when bursts of cramps came on.

I'd play music. Give myself physical cues like reminding myself to move my arms around in that weird kinda dance we Indians do (I'd just had an Indian wedding, and seriously, the bhangra is something YOU NEED to do once in your life). I'd focus harder on a sitcom I had on in the background while doing some work until I got to a point where doing this too became habitual.

I focused on all the things I had on my side. The knowledge of how all of this worked, and the science behind why this would help me out most. The knowledge that I HAD done this before, that positive thoughts DID help me with my pain. I even started looking at the pain as an opportunity - in a second, better light.

Yeah the pain came on often. But didn't that mean I'd have MORE opportunities to strengthen the cortical maps that would help me ignore it too?

And you know what - it did! I overcame chronic pain faster than I'd created and reinforced my habits of eating less and of being less self conscious, because I had so many opportunities to do it!

I really think this could help some of you guys out too.

It isn't perfect. When I cramp these days, I do still cry out and it does still stop me from doing things as it physically takes a lot more effort to do things when you do have issues like what I have.

But I have been able to ignore the pain more often than not.

My psychologist told me "you have to accept the pain". But doing that was REALLY HARD – accepting that and saying "I may suffer like this all the time..." was **impossible** for me to just jump straight into. CBT - cognitive behavioral therapy - and all that, I mean it could have helped, maybe... but again, that was hard to maintain.

It was the preparation of this mindset – the manipulation of my reward pathways and neuroplasticity – and the knowledge it could – that helped me stay on track. The acknowledgement that it'd take time, and knowing I'd fail and feel crappy some days – but that in the long run, I'd get there – prepared me.

When failure did come, when I felt pain overcome me (I knew I inevitably would in my journey), I'd grit my teeth and bear it, but found myself focusing on the long run, and taking solace in that I would get there, instead of trying to be this 'brave, strong dude who had to ignore everything' which I could not.

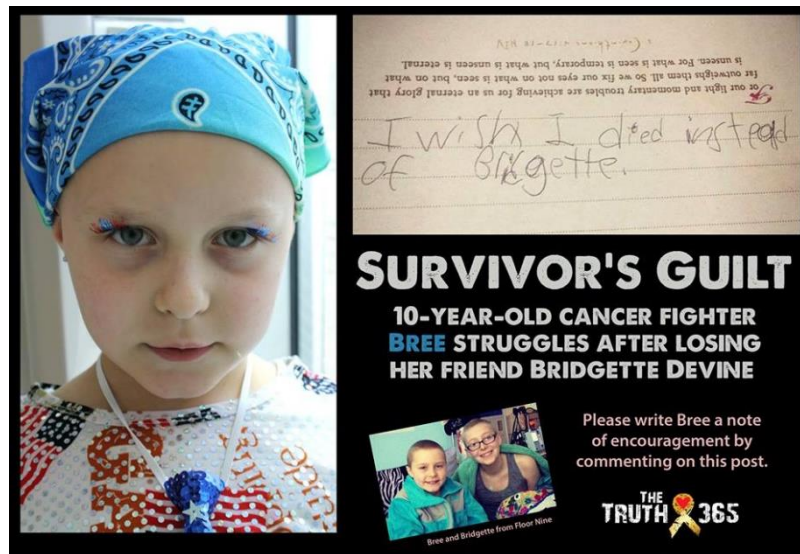
That helped me persist with this and get to this stage I'm at now, where I do ignore the pain, as an automatic response, when it comes on.

I know how much is sucked being told "It's all in your head" when I was really in the dumps because of all this, that's why I don't wanna kid you and let you know that it's not perfect. You can ignore fatigue as well, I've found, but my recent health run-ins made me realise that ignoring legitimate signs your body is suffering (something pain is not) is not exactly healthy.

But I hope my getting there can help some of you.

But ultimately – the thing that helped me most was the realisation that this life can be very long. **Why make my suffering worse by lingering on it?** Why let it take **anything** more than me than it should? That's what really got me thinking about this.

## Chapter 8 - Dealing with Loss



### This Is Tragic.

Bree and her friend Bridgette were diagnosed with leukemia, on the same day, at the same hospital. They underwent painful, grueling treatment together. They spent the hardest times of their young lives with each-other...

And now that Bridgette's died, Bree can't imagine living without her...

It speak volumes on our ability to love... And how love's power can even outweigh our ingrained instinct to endure.

*It's  
tragic...*

But this kind of loss happens every day. And not just to cancer patients like her and I.

I felt a loss similar to hers not too long ago. The loss of my first patient.

To be fair, I'm not a doctor, yet. After my experiences as a cancer patient though, my drive to wanna become a doctor - a dream of mine from childhood - only grew stronger. Hugely. But on occasion, I meet people, either through this blog, from a friend, or at hospital, who are going through hard times. Through my experiences, I try and help them by giving them encouragement, someone to talk to, and, in the case of other cancer patients, who, I guess, make up the majority of people I talk to, trying to inform them of what's to come (all the while trying to get them to be happy, despite what could be a long, hard battle).

Before my first bone transplant, I found that having the words of someone who's been through the process more powerful than those of my doctors. They just *stuck*, there was just more power and credibility to the words that came out of a fellow patients' mouth. And about midway through last year, I met a patient who

was about to undergo a BMT. He'd been going strong for years after his lymphoma was in remission, but it had come back, and this was his last option. A nurse responsible for coordinating the transplant asked if I could tell him about the procedure. I started talking to him and giving him tips for the procedure. I comforted, consoled and encouraged him when he got scared. I even prayed with his crying family at one point... and continued doing that through the whole transplant procedure, where I could.

I can *still* remember  
his eyes on the eve of his discharge from hospital.

I'd told him of all the things he had to look out for after the transplant - the possible fevers, rashes, diarrhoea and fatigue, amongst other things. I gave him tips on the recovery process, and assured him that he could do it.

I still remember the laughter of him and his family as I left his room. Despite his shaking, despite his pain, despite the suffering, his eyes were filled with hope for the future.

Hope that he could, and almost would be *normal* again.

That was  
the last time I saw him...  
He died a few weeks later.

He wasn't old - he was in his 20s, only a few years older than me. He'd only started living.

**HE HAD A SMALL CHILD GODDAMNIT!**

When I found out, I was shocked. He was suffering, he wasn't done with treatments yet. I knew that and he knew that too. But he'd seemed so positive, so sure he'd make it, and the doctors thought so too... but he didn't. After that shock, I started asking myself unanswerable questions.

What had he done to deserve  
this?  
What would happen to his baby?  
Why him and not me?

I was feeling the same thing Bree had after Bridgette died... the pain of sheer and utter loss... the pain of losing someone so close to me.

The next few weeks, I couldn't bring myself to do anything. I didn't wanna read, write, talk to people. All I did, day in and day out was browse pointlessly through the internet, not even registering what I was doing...

It was only later on that I realised,  
that I was told, that I was going through depression.

Frank's death was a major cause of it, but the [frustration of the ongoing treatment](#) and the medications I was on, all contributed to my feeling down... out... and empty.

I could see that something was wrong... I didn't want it to stay that way.

But it was *JUST SO*  
*HARD* to even break the pattern of doing nothing and not caring.  
Especially after the world  
seemed so meaningless, so unfair, after all this.

After a while... when I could bring myself to do it I sat down and asked myself, what next?

It was then that I remembered my own [blog post about depression](#). I looked over that post again. And I took my own advice.

I talked  
to somebody about it.  
That somebody, for me, was Dad.

I told him how I was feeling, and he listened. He didn't know about Frank's death, didn't know about the loss I was going through. But he gave me another perspective of looking at things... and that would mean the world to me. Me, I was trying my best to help people. And that's not a bad thing to want to do. But he made me see that I was overdoing it - I was giving up my own happiness, sleep and even food only months after my second transplant, a critical stage of my health.

I was staying up late, talking people through their problems, writing too much too often and pushing myself harder than I should've been.

He assured me that I would help more people in the long run through my being a doctor, if I first helped myself. I agreed. He also convinced me that I'd help others in the short term if I did that too. I couldn't write or study medicine if I was stuck in hospital for the next few years, right?

And that helped me see that I couldn't hurt myself anymore over Frank's death.  
A different perspective was all it  
took...

But the question still  
remained.

## How could I get over the loss?

This time I loved back to [how I used my mind to beat my cancer](#) and again took my own advice.

## I asked myself why.

Why was I was feeling that way...

After a while of soul searching, I saw it was exactly what that poor girl was going through. Survivor's Guilt.

The feeling of regret after you lose a loved one. It's the same regret when you fail at something at life. Regret that you hadn't done enough, hadn't been there enough. It only adds to the melancholy that is loss.

But why was I punishing myself that way, instead of asking what Frank would have wanted for me?

In the end... I knew that he would want  
me to be happy. To do him proud.  
*Why  
shouldn't I do that instead?*

Why was I blaming myself for  
Frank's death.  
I thought I'd given him hope.  
And then stolen it from him...

That was what was eating me.  
On top of the loss of a good  
friend.

But after a while of asking myself why again, I realised that I had told him of all the risks, of all the pain that comes during and after a bone marrow transplant. I told him he wasn't done yet - that the recovery process takes years for some. All I'd done was give him advice for getting through the procedure and speeding up his rehabilitation. And someone to talk to. Someone to visit him, laugh with him - someone to give his brothers and wife a shoulder to lean on when they needed it. Yeah, he died young, and yeah the last few weeks were filled with struggle. But there was no way I could have stopped that. He'd been unlucky to even get the disease in the first place, yet alone get one the chemo and a transplant couldn't fix.

That reminded me of a quote  
from M.A.S.H.

“Rule  
number 1 of war [or medicine, or life], young men die.  
Rule  
number 2, doctors [, no-one] can’t change rule number 1.”

What I’d done was give him some happy moments in the last days of his life. I’d done all I could do. I had made a difference.

That guilt I was feeling was only harming me. Something Frank would never have wanted for me. And realising that allowed me to let that pain go...

But I didn’t want it to end that way.

The loss of this still stuck. The feeling that this was all unfair was still there... But... sad as that was, I couldn’t change that... *So... why was I only focusing on that?* The best way I could honour his life, and let him live on, past his time, I realized, *was to learn from my experience with him and help others get through what I went through.*

That’s what this post is about.  
SO WHAT DID FRANK TEACH ME?

He reminded me that no-one can live  
forever, that no-one always wins in life.

That when we lose someone or  
something we care about, we will miss them.  
But once we get past our grief and failure, we have a choice on how we deal with  
it.

That his personality. His spirit. His impact on this world... Still lived on, beyond  
past his time, by how he’d changed those around him. By how his amazing family  
gathered around to help each-other. By how he could laugh in the face of much  
pain...

That we can either dwell on the past  
and close ourselves off to others and to opportunities...  
Or we can learn from them, from the  
mistakes we’ve made on our journey with someone or to something, and use that  
to *not only get over our loss*, but also to *improve*  
*ourselves.*

That way we can be more successful, influential and HAPPY human beings.  
Ones our loved ones would be proud of.

It won't happen in a day. We may have to do some soul searching to get there.  
When you lose someone close... it's impossible to 'just move on.'  
If we can't see any other way of looking at it, *talk* to somebody about it.

I hope my experience with Frank can help you see your way around your losses. When you lose someone close to you - a friend, a family member, your mother, your father, your son - you will feel loss, and you will feel pain.

Frank was a close friend. He'll always be a part of me. I can only imagine how hard it would be to lose a brother, partner or child to this disease...

But after a while, *YOU* have the choice on how to remember them. So LEARN from those you've lost. Let their time on this Earth, let their qualities, their words, their philosophies, or their tragedy, inspire you to be a better person.

They live through you if they've taught you how to live.  
They smile on as you smile and make them proud.

Always remember that.

\*\*\*\*

So What does that mean for me as a med student?

I've learnt that I can't save everyone...

I'm only human... people live and die, and no doctor or scientist, can change that. I've learnt that I need to take care of myself before I can help others. I need to make sure I get better first, that I don't overstress myself (especially now, while I'm still

recovering) and when I become a doctor, *that I don't blame myself for deaths or misfortune I could not prevent.*

But does that mean that I, like many doctors, close myself off to others and never get close to patients?

NO.

I'm not a person who can or wants to do that... And I'm not going to turn to alcohol, or other drugs, to get over the sadness my profession entails either. Alcohol abuse is surprisingly high amongst doctors, despite their better knowledge, for a reason...

What I will do is remember this story, and remember what I've learnt from it.

I will still care for others, I will still connect with my patients, I will ALWAYS try my best to help them in their times of need.

But when I lose someone, when I miss out on a promotion or fail an exam, when I just feel down and out... I will talk to someone.

And I WILL  
move on.



# Epilogue

If you've made it to this point...

Thank you.

To my loved ones.

Thank you even more.

I hope I can do all of you proud.

NikhilAutar.com

Email; [info@nikhilautar.com](mailto:info@nikhilautar.com)

Paypal; [nautar1@gettosleepeasy.org](mailto:nautar1@gettosleepeasy.org)

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