

7 things I've learned from having cancer



It's been five years since *Glamour* staffer Erin Zammett Ruddy was diagnosed with a potentially deadly form of leukemia. Now, on her "cancerversary," she's thinking about what the roller-coaster ride has taught her—and what it can teach you.

In November 2001, Erin Zammett Ruddy, now 29, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for most patients. Ever since, she's chronicled her story in these pages, including the shocking news of her older sister Melissa's diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2003. Now both are in remission—but Erin's got a lot on her mind.

I can still picture the moment so clearly: I was sitting in Dr. Lutsky's office, my heart pounding, choking back tears as he relayed the results of my routine blood test: *cancer*. That was five years ago, but it feels like yesterday—as Melissa has joked to me, "Time flies when you're having fun!" I didn't do anything special to commemorate the actual day, but I've been thinking a lot about this milestone. I feel lucky to be in remission, although I'm not considered cured since I'm still being treated. And I'm OK with that...swallowing a few pills each day is a small price to pay for living a normal life.

Still, those of you who've read my past few columns (or my blog, glamour.com/go/erin) know that I'm focused on having a baby and that I'll temporarily need to go off *Glee* to do so. I'm beyond excited about the possibility of starting a family, but all the looking forward has also made me want to look back. Despite the low points I've hit—and even with the fears I still have—cancer has taught me lessons that otherwise might have taken a lifetime to comprehend, and for that I am grateful. Thanks to cancer, I now know that:

You can't beat yourself up over stuff you can't control

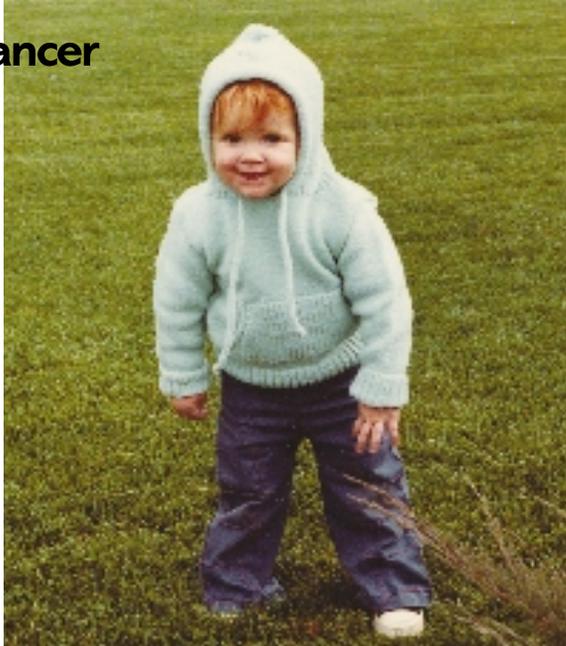
When I was diagnosed at 23, I couldn't possibly understand what I'd done to deserve cancer. I actually thought, was God mad that I had devolved into a Christmas/Easter church-goer? Was it all the X-rays I'd had at the dentist's over the years? The nachos and Diet Coke diet of sophomore year? I eventually realized, with the help of my doctors, that getting cancer wasn't my fault; it was just bad luck. I'm not saying I never felt sorry for myself, but once you accept that you've been dealt a bad hand, whatever that may be, you can focus on playing it the best way you can.

Obsessing about your body is a giant waste of time

B.C. (before cancer) I never missed a morning in the gym, rarely ate pasta, bagels or egg-and-cheese sandwiches (my faves), and glared at every roll and ripple in the mirror. Here's how crazy I was: I had a *Glamour* photographer with me at my first cancer appointment (to take pictures of me for my column), and I let him document everything—the tears in the waiting room, the somber talk with the doctor. But when I had to step on the scale, I asked the photographer to wait outside. *That's* what I couldn't handle—12 million readers knowing what I weighed. It took a serious dose of life-is-short reality to start living a little more. So here's a wake-up call from me to you: indulge. Quit worrying about

GRANT CORNETT

Yup, that's me
A photo that makes me happy and kind of sad. I still can't believe this little girl grew up and got cancer.



the jiggle. Get out there and start carpe-ing the diem! You shouldn't need a life-threatening event to do this stuff.

Helping others really does help you

The only way I knew how to feel less like a victim was to take charge—by sharing my story (at fund-raisers, in classrooms) and raising money and awareness for cancer. Melissa and I once raked in \$37,000 in six weeks for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society! Sure, my life revolves around cancer, but it's cancer on *my* terms. It's about my charity work and other patients and survivors I've met who've enriched my life in ways I didn't even know it needed enriching. One of the best things I ever did was visit the pediatric cancer ward at a local hospital for a "Glamour day of beauty." I brought makeup, and we all tried it on and painted each other's nails. The memory of the kids' smiling faces will always push me to do more.



My inspiration
Hanging out with young cancer patients soon after I was diagnosed. Tragically, Tanasia (in white) recently lost her battle.



The little love of my life
My nephew, Andrew. Swoon!



An important day
In 2004 I had my stem cells harvested in case I ever need them for treatment. It was grueling, but the peace of mind was worth it.



My cancer soulmate
With my sister Melissa in 2003, after she started chemo. She lost her hair, but never lost her smile.

It's OK to sweat the small stuff

After I was diagnosed, I felt like I had to become a new calmed-down, centered version of myself (a person many of us wish we could be, right?). I mean, I had cancer, for crying out loud; how could I get upset about running out of milk or traffic jams or Nick (my now husband) leaving the bed unmade every single morning? But I did. At first I thought I was failing as a cancer patient, failing to have that newfound perspective on life I thought came standard with every diagnosis.

I'm over that now. Sure, it would be great if we could all roam the earth with a Zen-like peace about us. But that's just not realistic for me. Besides, sweating the small stuff every once in a while keeps us from sweating the big stuff, the stuff we can't always control.

Don't keep it to yourself

When you're going through a tough time, you may not want to burden your friends, so you say nothing and feel miserably alone. What I've learned: People want to listen and help; they just need a green light. So get the conversation going, make it clear you want to talk and people will respond, I promise. Discussing your issues, no matter how big or small, is *the* best way to cope. That said, I do give Nick an occasional break from all my what-iffing. He's always there for me, but he just doesn't need to hear (again) that I lie awake some nights picturing, in full detail, the moment my cancer comes back.

Smile at the grouchy Starbucks barista

The thing is, you never know what a person is going through, so why not be nice? I'm not saying if a jerk steals my cab I wouldn't give him a dirty look. But I generally try to be kind; even a little friendliness can matter when you're down and out. Some days, if a stranger simply holds the elevator for me, I feel just a bit better about my situation.

The most important thing in life is family

OK, this one I always knew, but Mom and Dad, if you're reading, I want you to know that I couldn't have survived the past five years without you. I love you so much and feel lucky every day that you're in my life. Thank you. ©



No pain, no gain
Getting my annual bone marrow biopsy a few years ago with Nick by my side. I'm much braver now—they barely hurt!

To read Erin's past columns, visit glamour.com.

ERIN WITH CHILDREN AND ERIN WITH MELISSA: KAREN PEARSON; ERIN IN HOSPITAL: JOHN BRENNAN (2)