

My name is Helena, and I am going to tell you how you can, not just survive the challenges of life, but can emerge stronger for them. I can tell you this, not because I am a Clinical Psychologist, but because I have lived it, and I believe you can live it to.

First though, I want to invite you to join me on a journey.....

Imagine you are on a beach, a perfect beach. The weather, the temperature of the sea, your position on the beach is just perfect. Perhaps, if like me you enjoy people watching, you might see families with children playing and enjoying this perfect moment, loved up couples making plans, whilst older couples are remembering perfect times from the past. You stop, you breathe in deeply, you feel the warmth of the sun, smell the air and relish this perfect moment.

But then a voice in your ear says 'Tsunami'

You look around, the sea is flat calm, the sky blue. People around you continue to do what they were doing. You feel confused, it must be a mistake; there can't be a Tsunami.

Then the voice comes again, but this time louder and repeating the words 'Tsunami.... Run'.

Your blood runs cold, you don't know what to do, but fear takes you. You pick yourself up and run,

not sure where you are running to, you head for higher ground. You don't know what is coming, what is chasing you, but you run. You scabble over objects, pushing through the terrain ahead of you. Each step takes another toll on your body, you know you are injured, but you can't stop to think about what is happening. You just have to keep going, pushing further and further in order to survive. Hoping you will just get high enough to escape what is coming. Is it good enough?

This is how I explain my Tsunami. When my perfect world was shattered.

The Tsunami

Now, let me take you now to the local hospital outpatients' clinic. It's October 2018. I am waiting to be called through. The clinic is running very late, and I am the last appointment of the day, but I don't mind waiting. In fact, it is nice to stop. Life is busy. I watch my husband entertaining our 9-month-old son in the waiting room. I feel so blessed to have him after 10 long years of waiting for a baby. I have loved my maternity leave and the time spent with him.

In six days, I will be going back to work, how I will fit it all in I have no idea. As I plan in my head, a friendly and apologetic nurse, calls my name, she looks at my husband and son and gives me a gentle smile before taking us through for my appointment.

In the small room, the surgeon tells me the lump I had found in my breast, the one I thought was just to do with breast feeding, the one I only mentioned as an afterthought to the GP when I went to see them about a twisted ankle, that lump! That lump was actually Grade 3 cancer, it was in my lymph nodes, and I needed to start treatment now.

That night I sat feeding my son before tucking him safely into bed. It was then the wave of 'what if' thoughts came. My Tsunami was coming..... Run!

Some of you listening to this may have faced, or indeed may be facing, a similar threat. Whilst not everyone's Tsunami is cancer, everyone will have their own waves which come without warning, will threaten, will take and will change us physically and mentally.

The only certainty in our world is that life is uncertain. Some Tsunamis are huge, over facing walls, too vast to even see their limits. Others are smaller waves that are relentless. Coming one after another, after another. How do you respond, do you run trying to avoid being caught in its path? Or do you try and ride the waves, stay afloat and hope you can keep your head above water until it is over? What if the wave is too fast or too high to outrun? What if the waves keep coming and sap your energy? Do you feel it is hopeless, just too overwhelming? Are you exhausted from just trying to keep going and stay above water and not drown?

Option 1: Run

At first, when the threat of my Tsunami was on the horizon, I tried to run. I tried to turn my back on the threat and focus on a safe point in the distance. Getting through the next test, the next treatment, the next surgery. When the end points moved, such as when a new cancer lump was found after chemo, or when I needed more surgery as they hadn't got it all, I would push harder towards the next goal. Every procedure, every appointment ravished and mutilated my body. But the cuts went deeper than just the surface. Although I knew I would never be the same, I didn't stop to feel or to grieve for what was lost. I cut myself off from experiencing the present, telling myself I would deal with 'it' when I get to the end. But what if there would never be 'an end'? Spending my time in the pursuit of running to stay alive, I would have missed my chance to live. In life, how many times do you find yourself doing the same, focussing on getting to the end, just doing what needs to be done in order to survive? Every time you stop being present and find yourself counting down to the end of the day, the next weekend, the next holiday, to retirement? Wishing away weeks, months, years at a time. Every time you do this, you are not experiencing and living life, you are merely passing through the motions. Life is not about where we end up, inevitably we will all end up in the same place. Our Tsunamis will still impact us the same whether we run for higher ground or not. Life is a journey, not an end point.

Option 2: Ride the Waives

So if we don't run, what do we do?

Try and stay above water? How many times have you been told to 'ride the waves' and stay afloat?

After set back, after set back, I was exhausted. I chose to accept what was happening and just 'ride the waves', go with the next suggestion of treatment, the next surgery, I was a passenger of the journey with no control over where the waves took me. Whilst this took the sting out of 'bad news', I had relinquished my control and accepted my fate. How many of you find yourself exhausted from trying and seemingly getting nowhere? How often do you not oppose or challenge what comes, but accept 'it', conform and wait for the next wave to come. Whilst this feels like the path of least resistance, riding the waves is likely to take you to a place you do not want to be. Maybe you find yourself acting in ways that aren't in line with your values or what you believe to be right. Riding the waves you might survive, but you won't be able to live your best and most rewarding life.

Option 3: Face and Embrace the Tsunami

So, if we don't run, and we don't accept the inevitability of fate, what do we do? I want to put to you a third option, one which not only allows you to survive, but actually enables you to be alive. Here is how you face and embrace the wave, harnessing its power to be stronger.

Humility

When I was diagnosed, I questioned 'why me?'. I felt picked on, targeted. My Tsunami had to be the greatest and cruellest. The truth is though, I am no more special than you, or the next person. Everyone has their own challenges that are tough and stretch us to our limits. Recognising that I am human, that there is a greater power than me and that my plans, which I thought I had ultimate control of, were more like wishes, allowed me to let go of the unattainable need to be in control. In life, be humble. Know you are human, as

is the person next to you, and as such we are all perfectly imperfect. Embrace the power. The greater the challenge the greater the change.

Before I was ill, I would never have believed I would be able to go through the treatment regimes, the surgeries and come so close to death. However, by embracing the challenge, I have been able to grow in ways I could not have imagined. I don't put off until tomorrow what I can do today. I also, don't sweat the small stuff anymore. Where doing a 10-minute Ed Talk, may have freaked me out in the past, I now think when you have faced the prospect of death, what is 10 minutes! Every adversity is an opportunity to grow, to learn, to shape yourself into who you want to be.

Use the pressure to motivate! Use the fear to give you drive! Use the anger to make change! Use the love to build connections.

Give

When fearful of challenge, we can easily focus on ourselves. Slipping into a selfish survival mode.

The irony is, at times of challenge we need others, we need connections to help navigate the journey. The act of giving not only benefits others, but also has positive effects on us. During my cancer treatment, I joined the Mummy's Star Facebook group. Here I was able to offer support to other mums diagnosed whilst pregnant or during the first year of their baby's life. I'd share my story, offer a sounding board and would always reply with 'I'm in your pocket' when anyone posted a picture of their 'waiting room feet' when they had an appointment. When embracing your Tsunami, look for ways you can use your experience of adversity to help others. Maybe raising money, raising awareness or setting up a new supportive community. There are many ways to give.

Gratitude.

Whatever you face, face it with gratitude, gratitude that you are able to breathe another day. Acknowledge and own what you have, don't mourn what you don't. Cancer and its treatment took a lot from me. But whilst I joke, I look like Sally, the rag doll from Tim Burton's 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' Movie, I thank God that I am here. I am grateful for washing my sons school uniform and hanging it out on the line on sunny days. I am blessed to be able to make a birthday cake for my nephew and see his face light up when he sees it for the first time. I am able to message my husband after he has left for work to wish him a good day and get a heart back. Gratitude can be found in the most unusual places if we just look. When I was ill, my mum stepped in. She was by my side throughout. She came with me to every appointment including sitting with me all through the long chemo days even if it was just whilst I slept. These moments with my mum were so precious; time together I would not have had if I had not been ill, as she died suddenly, during the first lockdown, five months after I finished treatment. So much to be thankful for all around us every day. Embracing life and all of its challenges, allows us to recognise what we have and what opportunities are available to us.

The Summary

Challenges are part of being human. The journey of life will shape us. Whilst we can't choose what Tsunami challenges will come our way, we can choose how to face these and let every moment and experience be an opportunity to become who we want to be. Be empowered by the power of this world and your life.

Back to the Beach

Picture yourself back on the beach.

Stop! Take a deep breath.

Feel your feet firmly planted on the ground. All of your senses present in this moment.

Look out over the water, breathe in the fresh air and see the waves rolling in. Know that the sea is never static. Every day is a new and exciting opportunity to learn and live.

Listen to the sound of the waves.

Embrace the power..... Be Empowered.