A Fitness Mission Forged by Childhood Cancer

Phil Catudal credits his early cancer experience with his motivational approach to wellness.

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Los Angeles celebrity fitness trainer and author Phil Catudal, 30, remembers having cancer as a kid. In fact, he doesn't remember anything before. "I remember the faces of the doctors and nurses at the hospital and the shots and the lumbar punctures."

He was 2, almost 3. His parents noticed that he'd gone from being a seemingly robust baby to one with bags under his eyes who caught every infection going around. They took him to the pediatrician, and within two weeks, he was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia, a cancer in which the bone marrow produces immature rather than mature blood cells. He spent the next six months in a hospital in Montreal, near where his family lived, and remained in active treatment for the next two years. "I was the bald kid in kindergarten," he recalls. By the time he was 8, when he'd been in remission for five years, his doctor told him and his family that he was cured.

The experience formed his life—motivating his own fitness journey and his mission to help others get and stay healthy. He's a personal trainer—TV commentator Van Jones is a client—and author (with health writer Stacey Colino) of the new book Just Your Type: The Ultimate Guide to Eating and Training Right for Your Body Type. The book lays out fitness/nutrition programs based on body types: ectomorph, mesomorph, endomorph and combinations of those three.

When Catudal looks for the origins of his positive attitude toward wellness, he credits the support he had as a child living with cancer. "I'm so grateful to the people who were around me as a child," he says. "My earliest memories were being told 'You can do anything,' 'You're a superhero,' 'You can beat it.'"

A Catching-Up Childhood

At 8, when he had his chemotherapy port removed—his friends called it his "hockey puck"—Catudal had plenty of catching up to do. He felt it was too late to get into team sports—his school friends were way ahead of him—but he threw himself into street hockey, weekend football, water sports. Then at 11, cancer visited again—this time, it was his father, age 45, a weight lifter and marathoner, who had brain cancer. "He was told he'd have only two months to live. He lasted a year."

At 14, Catudal, following in his dad's footsteps, started weight training. "From age 14 to 18, I went from average to the most muscular kid in high school," he says. He started training people unofficially, and when he was 25, with a bachelor's degree and an MBA, he realized his passion wasn't in business but in fitness training. He brings his early experience with the "optimistic environment" that surrounded him as a child with cancer to his training. His motto: "Love each step of the journey as much as the transformation itself."

Training People With Cancer

Nowhere is that approach more important than in training people undergoing cancer treatment or recovery. He's now working with both men and women with cancer.

For these clients, training is an indispensable part of building morale. "It's the proud factor," he says. "They show up; they're tired; but working out improves their mental well-being. It might be superhard, and they don't want to do it, but doing it makes them feel better."

"I have one client [with cancer] who can last only 10 minutes on the treadmill on some days. But she loves it. She tells me, 'It makes me feel like I'm not giving in.'" His advice: "Just get there. Get on the treadmill or the bike."

Catudal follows new research that shows how exercise may improve cancer survival. "It's important to do everything you can to strengthen your body. That may allow you to take more treatment. I encourage people to exercise comfortably in a way that their doctors say is safe and to give your body the nutrition it needs to fight with you."

His motivational approach—both for people with cancer and everyone else—is to emphasize not what you don't want but what you do. "Too many people have negative goals—'I don't want to be sick or fat or unhealthy,'" he says. "But positive goals, such as 'I want to be healthier, to feel better, to be strong, to be proud of myself' are much more motivating."

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