

Dear Friend,

I am writing to you as a parent of a child who spent the better part of a year of his life on the 3B ward at McMaster Children's Hospital. I am not sure if this letter will end up with you or your parents, but either way, I am hoping it will give you a reason to smile.

When my son had just turned three years old, he was diagnosed with cancer (Stage 4 Neuroblastoma). He weighed 38 pounds and based on his scans, they estimated that 7 pounds of that was tumor. He was given a 19% chance of survival. He went through chemotherapy, radiation, and finally an autologous stem cell transplant at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, where he lived in isolation for 39 days. As a result, I can sort of understand what you might be going through right now.

Let me share some of the things that we did to try to make it more bearable:

1. He loved the Franklin books, so one day we turned his room into Franklin's tree fort – the Friendship. We made a steering wheel for the end of his bed, a flag, portholes, and a captain's hat.
2. Together we wrote a sign for his hospital room door to thank all the people who made his days brighter (the nurse who let him take his own temperature, Papa Train, the cleaning lady who allowed him to help mop his floor, Maria – the child care worker – who let him play with therapy dolls giving them needles and flushing their tubes, etc.).
3. Even though he was not old enough, we bought scratch BINGO scratch cards. They helped to pass the time and we just used the winnings to buy more of them.
4. My husband, who spent every night with our son, rarely slept so he played online Scrabble with people in Australia to keep himself entertained.
5. We brought in a cribbage board. First we taught him how to count by flipping over cards and moving the pegs that number of spaces, but he was smart – so it was not long before he learned to play the actual game of cribbage too.
6. We wrote stories and read books.
7. We sang songs just to ourselves and sometimes to other patients.
8. We made puzzles (There are now online jigsaw puzzles that you can do).
9. We closed our eyes and envisioned the "bad disease" inside his body and told it to GET OUT.
10. We made cards for other patients on the floor.
11. We learned magic tricks, which he would practice on the nurses.
12. He desperately wanted to go fishing, so we brought in a small fishing pole and tied a key chain to the end of the string. He started to practice casting from his bed to the wall – and when he was well enough we went out into the courtyard playground so he could cast out there.

It's hard to remember it all, but the reason why is the best part. It is because next month he is going to be turning 22 years old. He survived the "bad disease"! He is a happy and healthy young man with a beautiful girlfriend, and he is about to graduate with a business degree from the University of Guelph in a few weeks. My point is this: there can be happiness even in challenging times. We just have to look for it. AND there is hope – even when it feels like there might not be. Stay Strong! Be happy!

Sharon

A teacher and mother of a cancer survivor who was treated at McMaster



Letters for Hamilton