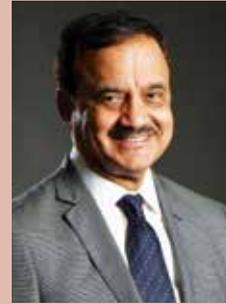


My Tryst with Cancer: And Being a Winner!



Praveen Sood,
Group CFO of Hindustan
Construction Company

“ILLNESS is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born, holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

Susan Sontag

Being the Head of Finance and a responsible officer, I had no choice but to get on the phone every day, against the wishes of my family and doctors. This was highly stressful, but I could manage it with the great effort of my team members.



Life throws up surprises when you least expect them. For me, a workaholic and a healthy person with no known medical problems, what happened in 2011 was a turning point and a transformation in many ways. I recall vividly the day of 3rd January 2011, when I received the report of the biopsy of a tumour that had been removed from my stomach. I was diagnosed with a cancer, “Carcinoma of the Ampulla of Vater”, which is widely known as the “The Emperor of all Maladies.”

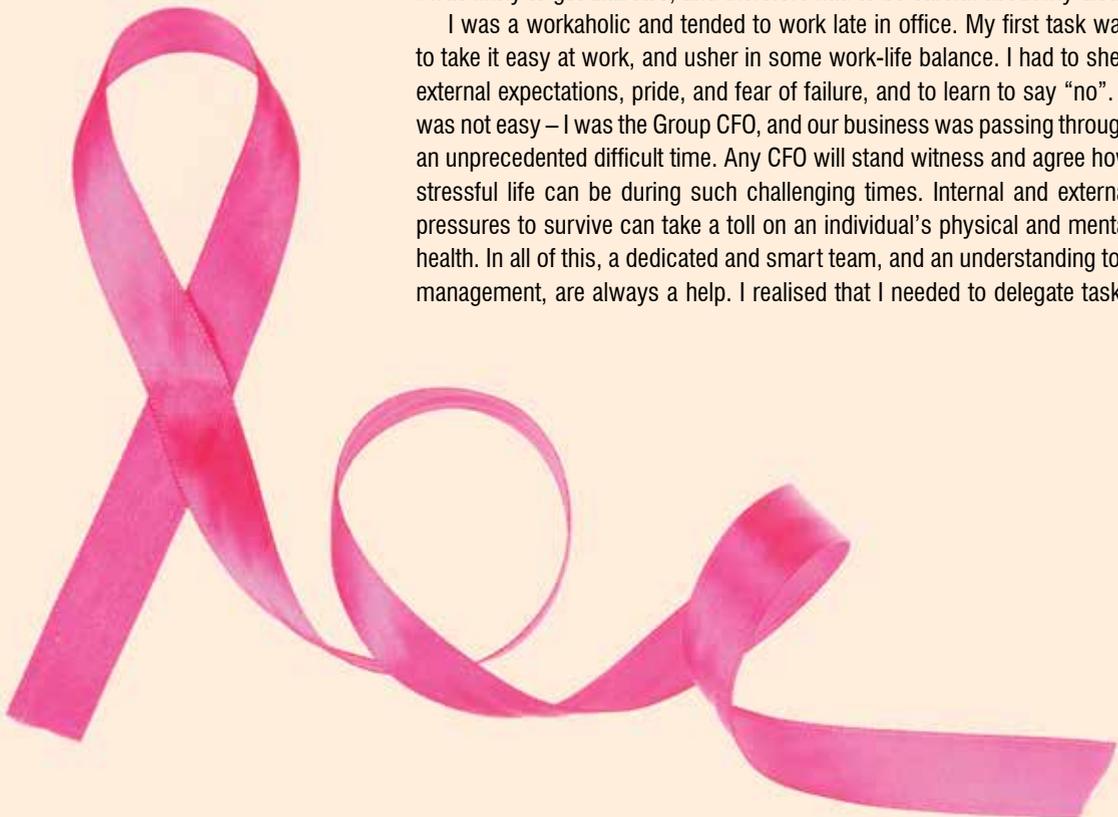
Facing the truth

With a grim expression, the doctor informed me what it would entail. However, he tempered the bad news with a good one – that the cancer could be removed surgically. I visited Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital to inquire about the surgery. The scene at the hospital pulled down one’s spirit. Numerous patients suffering from various stages of cancer were lying everywhere, including in the corridors of the hospital. It was a very sad sight and a sinking feeling seized me. The sight made me nervous, and I almost felt like running away. It dawned on me how widespread the disease is in India.

The meeting with the surgeon was intimidating not just for me, but for my wife too. He explained that the surgery, known as “Whipple Surgery”, is among the most complex surgeries across the world, and has a failure rate of 5 per cent – which meant that there was a 5 per cent probability that I would not survive it.

We returned home with a heavy heart. For the first time, I realised how uncertain and unstable life can be, and how all my efforts, including savings and plans, suddenly had no meaning. At the request of our family doctor, we sought a few more opinions, including one from my cousin who is a doctor in the US. The results were the same. We got

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the dreadful advice that surgery was inevitable, and that I must write my will and decide for my family before the operation.

The painful drill

I chose an experienced doctor, who first refused to believe that I was a cancer patient – perhaps because, on the surface, I seemed healthy and fit. I underwent the surgery on 14th February 2011, and survived at the cost of the head of my pancreas, a part of the stomach, duodenum, gall bladder, intestines, and 15 kgs in weight. I stayed for three weeks at Lilawati hospital, and thereafter recuperate at home for one month. The last 15 days at home were challenging. My company had to pay off an FCCB liability of USD 100 million by 31st March 2011, and it was important to arrange this money to avoid default. I organised road shows for raising funds, and was the face of the organisation. Being the Head of Finance and a responsible officer, I had no choice but to get on the phone every day, against the wishes of my family and doctors. This was highly stressful, but I could manage it with the great effort of my team members. Looking back, I am thankful to God that he gave me the strength to handle that crucial feat.

Recuperating

After the surgery, the surgeon gave me one year to regain some of my lost weight and strength. After one year and following a check-up, he told me unequivocally that it will be my level of fitness that will determine how well I cope with my refurbished body. With a reduced stomach and pancreas, I was likely to get diabetes, and therefore had to be careful about my diet.

I was a workaholic and tended to work late in office. My first task was to take it easy at work, and usher in some work-life balance. I had to shed external expectations, pride, and fear of failure, and to learn to say “no”. It was not easy – I was the Group CFO, and our business was passing through an unprecedented difficult time. Any CFO will stand witness and agree how stressful life can be during such challenging times. Internal and external pressures to survive can take a toll on an individual’s physical and mental health. In all of this, a dedicated and smart team, and an understanding top management, are always a help. I realised that I needed to delegate tasks

more. In the process, I learned a valuable lesson – trust your team and leave them alone to perform, and they are likely to do a better job. Moreover, young individuals have their own way of working, and are in fact can be better at handling stress. I also realised that women are more resilient and mentally stronger than men in tough times, and therefore it is important to have women in key roles.

Transformed and blissed

Coming to fitness, my weight loss due to the illness was a blessing in disguise. To ensure that I did not re-gain more than half of what I had lost, I started taking short walks. The first few days were torturous as I did not have the strength to walk for more than 15 minutes, and that too slowly. I had never been fond of exercising in a gym, and I found it boring to walk on a treadmill in an air-conditioned space. I began to go for morning walks in the garden, and found that easier and interesting. I could easily walk for 30 minutes as my mind was busy enjoying the greenery, flowers, and people. Slowly and steadily, I made it to a 60 minutes-walk with some brisk steps. To make it sustainable, I started the practice of two walks of 45 minutes each, one in the morning and another in the evening. This ensured that in case I missed one walk, I could go for another one. God must have been watching my efforts, so he decided to play his role. An indoor badminton court opened next to our building, and with a few like-minded friends – who had equally poor stamina and skills – I decided to give it a try. This turned out to be a blessing, as very soon we were hooked to this form of entertainment. We started to play 45 minutes of badminton every day – this was tiring, but the feeling was just blissful. To this day, I continue to play the game.

A new me

Meanwhile, for mental and emotional fitness, I formed a new friends' circle of younger individuals who do not belong to my office or finance fraternity. This has helped me immensely as our discussions are far removed from work, and are about such topics as movies, food, and things happenings around us. I stopped carrying work home, either physically or mentally. This helps me to remain calm and de-stress. I make sure that I take regular family travel breaks to see my dream places. Incidentally, in a trip to the US, I bought a DSLR camera as it was available at the price of a point-and-shoot travel camera. In order to handle this camera, I did some reading online and attended workshops to learn to use it. This opened a new chapter in my life and today, photography is a passion, and the camera a companion, in every trip or holiday.

Introspecting, I find that I am a better human being. Physically, I am fitter. With regard to my work, I am more efficient as I have learnt to depend on my finance team very effectively. I have been recognised among the Top 100 CFOs in the country four times in the last five years. I was also selected as a Top Ten CFO in Investor Relations by a poll conducted by Thomson Reuters. At a deeper level, I have found inner joy and happiness, which was perhaps earlier missing in my life. I have come to believe that God can change our lives overnight, and there is always a silver lining in everything we go through in life. I am satisfied with, and cherish, my life, and I could not be happier. ■

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