

Sam - "It changed everything"

Diagnosis

Hi I'm Sam. I'm 25 and am a university student. It's almost a year ago now that out of the blue my Dad was diagnosed with a brain tumour. It was such a shocking traumatic time for our family, even more so because it was so unexpected. We didn't even know anything was wrong - its just not the sort of thing you expect to happen.

My parents were driving to Wellington to visit my sister when they realised something wasn't right about my Dad's driving. When they finally arrived in Wellington things deteriorated for Dad and he ended up in Hospital. At first the doctors thought it was probably a stroke. That was scary enough but things would get worse. The doctors weren't really sure what was going on and started undertaking lots of tests. My brother and I found it really hard to be so far away – we were really worried. In the end we realised we had to be with Dad and we flew to Wellington. I felt scared and confused – all we knew was that Dad was very sick. When we arrived at the hospital I felt surprised that he looked just the same and yet I knew something was badly wrong. Luckily my aunt and uncle were there as well – I realised how important it was to have people around who know and support you when everything is so uncertain. The doctors eventually decided an MRI scan was needed. That was when we discovered that it was not in fact a stroke, but Dad had a tumour in his brain. It seemed so surreal – not the sort of thing you expect to happen to someone you know, let alone one of your parents. We all felt totally devastated and also unsure about what it would mean for Dad. Dad was flown back to Auckland where we were told that he would have to have surgery to remove the tumour and tests to find out what sort of tumour it was. The idea of my Dad having surgery on his brain was terrifying – would he ever be the same again?

After Surgery

After the surgery, I was amazed at how quickly Dad seemed to recover. The size of the scar and staples across his head were intimidating. We had to wait a couple of weeks for the results of the biopsy – that was really hard. Eventually finding out that Dad had a Glioblastoma, the worst sort of tumour, was the hardest thing – the surgeon explained everything but it was hard to take it all in.

Looking back on it I think it was like a combination of feeling in shock and trying to process the news, while at the same time trying to be supportive to Dad. When you are a young adult you are pretty focused on your own life but then something like this happens and it changes everything. It is a bit of a change in roles – how do you start looking after your parent when they have always looked after you? In the beginning none of us knew what Dads journey was going to be like – the doctors talk statistics and general trends about how people cope and what treatment might be like – but they all say it depends on the individual. Dad seemed like he wanted to focus on the positive and keep hopeful – I thought that was a good thing. But I also felt like I needed to be prepared for the worst.

Talking to people close to me was really important – sometimes I would have questions or be worried about something so it helped to share that with someone who understood. Some of my friends didn't really get what I was going through – it was hard to explain it to them really, particularly as I knew they just wouldn't be able to relate to it. Even though I had some people to talk to about Dad's diagnosis and treatment, I felt like it was important to continue on with some normality, like going to Uni and seeing friends. I thought Dad would want me to get on with my life despite everything that was going on. The weird thing was that in between trying to keep things a bit normal, I was helping out by taking Dad to radiation sessions, which was completely not normal. It was good to feel I could do something practical to help. It also meant we could chat on the way which was great – I think the whole thing has really allowed us to get closer. The strange thing about major events like this is that it changes how you think and feel about things – and it makes you realise what is really important.

Dad has now completed 6 months of radiation and chemo – he seems to have managed pretty well with it all. We still don't know what the future holds but he is keeping positive.

If I had to say the one thing that has changed most for me, it would be my perspective on life – how important it is to value the people around you, because you just don't know what life will bring.