

I'm Kevin. I'm sixty-nine years old and four months ago I learned that I had incurable cancer.

Interviewer: What sort of cancer?

It's prostate cancer which has spread to my bones.

Background

I, I believed I was indestructible. I think a lot of men do. I look in the mirror and I see eighteen, and I think why is my hair not brown. It must be the light that's wrong. So I did have that sense, male sense of I'm going to go on forever, yeah I did, yeah. My first wife died of cancer at the age of forty-nine, but I, I, I only had a vague vie-, uh expectation that I would die uh, uh one day and, and what this gives you is, is clarity about that, real clarity.

Diagnosis

Interviewer: So how long do you think you have?

You, you don't know I mean I'm having, I'm having hormone therapy. I'm having chemotherapy and then I'm in a, in a trial of radiotherapy as well and the prognosis might give me an additional two years and the, the median that the, the trial I'm in is showing is an additional, a median of two more years. So I could be above the median or below the median, uh but I'm hanging on to that median as a kind of target to go for.

My wife was with me and, and uh we wanted to know roughly how long we could ha-, we could expect that I would live, be-, because it's so important [stutter]s it felt at the time and it, it, it's right that you, to know how long you have helps you develop the game plan for coping with it.

If I had a three month diagnosis I think I would be absolutely focussed on the final stage; how I wanted to die, where I wanted to die and those things I had to get sorted before that point arose, whereas if you have more time than that you will think about those things, but you will also have more time to enjoy the days that you have.

Coping mechanisms - being positive

[Sighs] The, the first choice is that there is no point to being angry. There is no point in being disappointed. What we've decided to do talking about it is we're going to live each day as best as we can. Take each day as a gift and say, what can we do today? And, not big things, little things, go for walks, enjoy, enjoy getting a bird table as we have and watching the birds come, doing things each day and at the end of the day say hey that was, that was great wasn't it, but I can't imagine dealing with it any other way than try and find the best in it.

Because the, the one of, the secret in life is to find the best in every situation and every person you meet, and this is another one of those situations. You have to find the best in it.

Interviewer: Do you manage to laugh a lot?

Oh absolutely. Absolutely the, you have to laugh at yourself. You have to laugh at the vanities, you know the, you know I've got a chemo haircut now. I used to comb my hair very carefully [laughs] and I've given up on that. You have to laugh at yourself and the situation uh is, find humour, because humour is warm and humour feeds on yourself. What, what you, what, what I don't want is any bitter, there is no room for bitter, there should be no room for bitterness, and that, now I'm saying that as a sixty-nine year old and I do know if I was nineteen I may feel differently, but I am not bitter about where I am. I'm grateful.

Coping mechanisms - project management

If you said to me, did I want this project? I can think of other ones I'd rather have than project managing my own death, but the truth is we all have, we're all going to die, and I think we forget that in our lives that, that every life ends, and to have the chance to [stutters] organise and do things and make productive use of the time that's left is a real privilege, uh and I'm grateful for that chance.

For somebody who's dad dropped dead at sixty-four who went out of the door to go down to the doctors to get a test result and he dropped dead in the High Street so my mother was never able to say goodbye, it's a huge privilege to know that we've actually got some time, and we don't know how much time but we've got some time to still enjoy things together to put our lives as much where we want them to be as possible.

It's a real opportunity to live the rest of my life uh as, as positively as possible.

Lifestyle

You read all the stuff about diet and I know that I could become a green tea drinking vegan and that might give me a little while longer, but I don't want to change what I eat and what I drink and what we have fundamentally because it's part of who we are, and it's part of the pleasure we take uh from everyday life. So we might, I'm trying to eat a little less chocolate and I'm trying not to eat blue cheese, and those are the things which at the margins would make a difference.

But, but the things that have got me to sixty-nine, there's no point in junking them now in, in case it gave me another two months, cos it's given me the, the sixty-nine years I've had and that includes a glass of wine [laughs].

Interviewer: Good for you.

Relationships - wife

I'm on a journey. I'm hugely lucky. I've got a supportive wife who's on the journey with me for as long as she can be, but there'll come a point where our jou-, where our destinations diverge cos I'm going to die and she's not, and she's going to have a life beyond and I see my duty as her husband is to help her approach that new life as positively as she can. I've organised a kind of a list of things that over the years I've done rather than she's done. It's a Word document of all the things that I need to show Jenny, and we've been through nearly all of them. So there won't be anything that she'll ever have to say how did Kevin do that?

And, and that's uh that gives me great comfort, because it means that I'm loving her till the last possible moment.

Intensity

When we both worked full time essentially you worked in the week and you lived for the weekend. Uh what we now do is we make every day matter. Since the diagnosis four months ago we've actually had some of the best times of our life and we've talked about it. We've said what a great day was, today was. We've never felt closer. Um you, there's a new in, there's an intensity about your life when you know it's a finite one that you just I guess take for granted when you think you might live forever.

If you'd said to me um [stutters] would a dying person feel a new intensity, depending on my age I probably would have found that

unimaginable. I'd have thought they'd have been sad and down and angry, but that is not how I'm feeling and I know it helps that I'm sixty nine, but even so the gift of life is somehow reinforced when suddenly you're reminded it's finite.

Family problems

Interviewer: When you know that you haven't got long there will be, are there things that you think; that is not in the best possible place, that part of my life is something that I think I probably need to address. I'd like to sort that out before I die. Do you have any areas like that?

Yes I do. Yes I do. I have two children. Um my daughter has just given birth to our first grandchild and I talk to my daughter a lot more than I used to as a result of this. I also have a son, but sadly I have no contact with him. We've been estranged for a number of years and I doubt it, that's not how I wanted it to be and if I could put that right in some way before I die I would be delighted to.

That's the only stone in my shoe. And we all have to have a st-, you know families are complex things [laughs], and of all the jobs I've ever done midshipman to head teacher to chair of a PCT, nothing is as hard as being a parent. I think that being a parent is the hardest job on earth. I really do. And you do your best [claps hands on legs]. You really do your best and you get some things wrong inevitably.

The kind of circumstances I had to deal with my wife being terminally ill were really challenging and whatever I did wrong there I regret and if I can put any of that right I would be delighted, but I [stutters], when you're terminally ill you, I will forgive anybody anything and all I want to do is be forgiven back. I don't, I haven't got the capacity to pick over all the details that might be necessary for somebody for them to be satisfied.

But I would just like some forgiveness and I'm happy to give forgiveness. So yeah I regret the fact that I haven't seen my son for some eight years and it would be great if we could somehow make some progress on that while I'm still here.

It, it's the only stone in my shoe and I'd like to at least reduce it in size before I die.

What have you learned?

I've discovered that I have a capacity to deal with awful things, like a terminal diagnosis and the discomfort of the different treatments. I have a capacity to be optimistic. I think I'm braver than I feared I

might be. Uh and the other thing is a capacity to see humour in it, and you have to have a kind of gallows black humour sometimes to help you get through things, and I haven't had to draw on those resources, and uh it's kind of great to know they're there.

Interviewer: Did you know that you were this positive about it?

No I had no idea. It's a privilege and a joy and, and almost um [pause] shocking to discover that uh I can deal with it in a positive way, because I didn't know. I hon-, I didn't know those depths that you draw on, I didn't know I had them.

Death and dying

We don't talk enough about death. We talk about fulfilment and we talk about what makes you happy. The only truth in life is you will die. We all have to die and we never I think uh often enough can confront that in any way. I think if I was twenty, nineteen, twenty-nine, thirty-nine, forty-nine instead of sixty-nine I think I might well feel differently. I might well feel robbed of opportunity. I might well feel that I was entitled to longer. Uh I've had a very fulfilling career, several fulfilling careers.

Uh I've had some success. I've had some reward uh and all of that gives me I suppose some comfort, the comfort of age and also uh you do know as you get older you're getting closer to dying. It's there all the time. I'm not afraid of death because I know it will come to all of us.

I don't want to die at home. I think it would be awful to die in the bed we have slept in for eighteen years. I want to die in a hospice if I can or somewhere like that, and they are specialists in, I know from my NHS role, they're specialists in making people comfortable and pain management. So I'm not afraid. The technology out there uh I will rely on to make my death painless and my job is to make it as positive as possible which means smiling to the end and saying good bye, thank you.