

HOW I BECAME *MORE AWESOME* THAN DEADPOOL

EXPERIENCES & LESSONS



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“You solve one problem... and then the next one... and then the next. And If you solve enough problems, you get to come home.”

Matt Damon, ‘The Martian’

Foreword

It is the simplest and easiest thing in the world to forget that life is meant to be happy in. To believe the illusion that life is just an endless battle. The power of the mind works both ways.

This is a story, in two parts, of how I came to break this illusion through the power of gratitude, support, optimism and clarity of mind. I find this power in myself, in my family and friends, and in the vast energy of the universe - which I have only just begun to explore!

I know - *already* more awesome than Deadpool. But we'll come back to that.

The first section is about my experiences. The material events which challenged me to learn from them; the wake-up calls; the decision to Be Happy Anyway, no matter the weather, and understanding the demands of this choice.

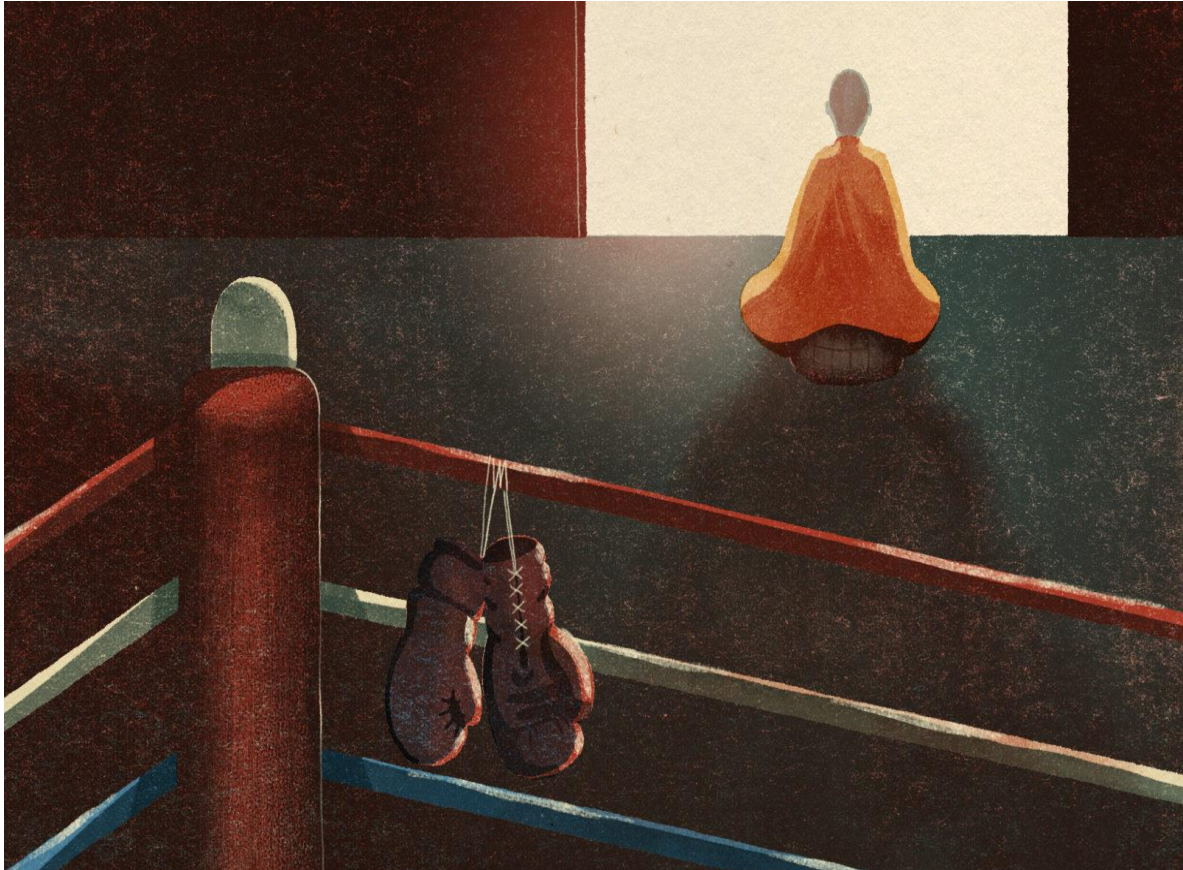
The second section details my strategy to implement this choice. It includes a daily guide to *my* view of ultimate wellbeing, as well as numerous resources, attitudes and habits which I have found on my journey of Awesomeness. Of course, every single one of us is different, and life demands different things of us. It is my sincere hope that you, dear reader, take from this section what resonates with you, and use it to your greatest advantage.

This is not an autobiography, nor is it a sermon. This is a journal of evolution and happiness in the life of someone *just like you*. I hope that, whatever your circumstances, you find value, and hope, in these pages.

Because I have come to realise one thing:

You do not need to have cancer to understand life.

Experiences



*“Mastering others is strength;
mastering yourself is true power.”*

Lao Tzu, ‘Tao Te Ching’

First, who the hell is Deadpool?

If you're not familiar with Deadpool, he's a superhero from the Marvel Comic Book series. In 2016, Deadpool - the movie - was released, and received international acclaim. Ryan Reynolds plays Wade Wilson (the man who becomes Deadpool), and his sarcastic and witty performance made Deadpool iconic.

Deadpool's origins are interesting to me. As the story goes, he is a Hitman - an assassin for hire - that develops cancer. He seeks treatment from a scientist, Ajax, who does cure his cancer, *and* give him superhuman invincibility, but disfigures him, leaving him with scars and lesions all over his body.

So begins the story of Deadpool.



Every Superhero has a life-changing origin story.
This is mine.

First of all, step aside, Ryan Reynolds - I used to be a Hitman too.



But we'll come back to that.

This is a story of how I became more awesome than Deadpool.

But this is a graphic story, so please be aware of this, and read on if you feel comfortable doing so. If not, feel free to jump over to part two whenever you feel like it. The purpose of this section is purely context.

Let's start at the beginning.

Mid 2019 - March 2020: Questions and Answers

This all began because I, a grown man, forgot to flush the toilet. It's probably the only time I've ever done that, but my wife Reisha happened to notice it, and she screamed. There was blood in my stool.

Now, if you know me well, you'll know that I have always had a high tolerance for pain. This is good for boxing, and many other endeavours, but not too useful when it comes to recognising when you have a health issue which needs seeing to.

I didn't see a doctor. In fact, I brushed it aside altogether. And though Reisha insisted that I seek medical attention, and tell her if it happened again, I did neither of these things. I was busy doing things I considered more important at the time.

Looking back on it now, it's clear that I made a mistake. Reisha, you're right, I should have seen a doctor. I wonder why I was always like this... for one reason or another, I have always felt that to grow, I had to suffer. And for everyone reading and thinking 'yeah, that makes sense' let me say this in no uncertain terms: Not True. I have now come to realise that mastery is in the plateau of continually doing something repetitively, daily. Not just suffering for the sake of suffering.

In the weeks and months after first noticing the blood in my stool, I began to develop severe and increasingly problematic abdominal pains. By January 2020, I was having recurring stomach pains and had to use the toilet three or four times a day. Only blood and mucus.

I know. Lovely stuff.

By the time February came along, the pain had become far worse. I was struggling to sleep - because I could feel an intense sensation of pain between my lower abdomen and my groin. It

felt like someone had just kicked me in the nuts - not too hard, but hard enough - intermittently throughout the day. I still wouldn't see a doctor.

Like I said... high pain tolerance.

By March, I was in the US for work, pitching my start-up to investors and had a critical presentation on the 12th. Though I'd planned to spend the weekend after the presentation celebrating, the pain was so bad by this point that I got the first flight back to Singapore. I was back on the 14th, using the toilet ten times a day and not getting any sleep. I finally decided to see my GP at Twin City Medical in River Valley.

My GP thought I had Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) - a relatively harmless condition - and recommended that I see a gastroenterologist, Dr Ng, at Mount Alvernia. Because I'd just come back from the US, and COVID was in full effect, I had to wait until the 31st for the appointment.

At my appointment, Dr Ng examined me and informed me that he felt I had Irritable Bowel Disease (IBD) - and that I should have a colonoscopy done that afternoon. They kept me in for the day, prepping me for the examination.

Colonoscopies involve you being put under general anaesthetic. So, I was knocked out cold for the whole procedure. That wouldn't be worth mentioning; if not for the fact that I woke up in a haze to a doctor saying, "We couldn't complete the colonoscopy, there was a pretty large tumour preventing us from going further". My eyes were opening and closing, and they closed as he said that.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I nodded, not really grasping the full gravity of what he'd said.

After I'd been parked in my room, a nurse informed me that I would need a CT scan to confirm the nature of the tumour. I looked at the nurse in a daze, and just said, "Wait, wait, wait, my

wife is coming soon, please explain it to her.” As soon as Reisha arrived, I told the nurse “Just so you know, she doesn’t like bad news”. Reisha already looked confused and concerned. The nurse then proceeded to tell her what she had already told me. Reisha just turned to me. I shrugged and smiled and may have said: “what are you gonna do?”.

We called our parents to tell them what we’d been told, and their concern was palpable. It was all so surreal. Within fifteen minutes Mamo Sajen was by my bedside. In his calm and collected way, he told me not to worry, and that we’d get to the bottom of the situation. Funny enough, I didn’t have an ounce of worry in me. I just accepted it and was glad that we had finally figured out what the problem was, and why I’d been in so much pain, why I was always feeling tired and couldn’t have more than two drinks without passing out - a tumour.

I had my answer.

And I named it Liverpool.

April 2020: Diagnosis & Surgery

I had an early morning CT scan scheduled, and I was fortunate enough to have, along with my dad and Reisha, my sisters Gee and Sandhya with me - both of whom had taken the day off to be with me. You know you're blessed when you have people around you who are willing to drop everything to just hang out with you in a hospital - and not a nice one, either.

I did the CT scan and waited in Dr Ng's waiting room with Team Awesome, which had grown by two members by this point with my uncles, Sonny and Sajen. The nurse kept us each a seat apart in a desperate attempt to comply with the COVID measures. Finally, we were called in.

Dr Ng informed us that the cancer had metastasised (spread to other parts of my body), confirming that it is stage 4 colon cancer. Just like that, I went from IBS to Stage 4 colon cancer in two days. You can't make this stuff up. It's just one of those moments. To many people's surprise, I did not react, stoic to the news.

Why?

It's simple. I had already made my decision. It didn't matter if the doctor told me that it was a false alarm or that I only had a few months to live. I had already decided in my mind that whatever it *was*, it was just another problem I had to solve, and I was going to use everything I had to make it happen. I felt like everything in my life had prepared me for a situation like this, and I was going to use every tool, every piece of wisdom, every resource at my disposal to get through this. Because - how could I not? I have so much to live for. I just thought of the people around me. I didn't feel like it was my time; I felt like I had (and have) so much more to give this world.

Reisha looked at me and said, "it's just so unfair."

I replied, "it's only unfair if I got it and wasn't capable of beating it, but I am, so it's not unfair."

I grew up with the Indonesian mentality of 'Tuhan itu adil' - that 'God is fair'. It's more of a cultural attitude and outlook on life than a religious thing. I have always felt that not having the resources, strength and tools to overcome an issue is truly unfair. So, while this was horrible news, I knew that it was just another challenge. I was physically, mentally and emotionally capable of getting through this. I felt lucky about that.

I knew this wasn't it. And this isn't it.

On general principle, I am just not having it, Cancer. You're a beast, a four-letter word, one that sends shivers up and down people's spines like the Grinch on Christmas Day, but you're about to meet your match and his name is Roh. You're about to see the wrath of awesomeness that is me, and when I'm done with you, I'm going to make it my life's mission that you don't come near anyone I know, and, hopefully, anyone in this world, ever again.

That's why I wrote this.

Still, my first reaction to the news was to apologise. I hugged Reisha, apologised, and sent my mom a text saying, 'Sorry ma'. Interesting isn't it - that my first response was to apologise for something that happened to me through no fault of my own?

Why was this the case? Is it an Indian thing, this feeling of inexplicable guilt? I didn't really question it that day, but looking back, I was about to get my first lesson. That feeling of guilt came from knowing that I was going to put them through emotional turmoil for months to come. That same feeling is what drove me to fight this thing like a gladiator, knowing that I wasn't going to leave them or let them down.

Later I came to unpack this further and realised that I didn't have to apologise for something I didn't do. This wasn't my fault. I

didn't ask for cancer. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Still, I felt guilt. This is what Shunryu Suzuki refers to as The Duality of Life, in 'Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind'. The cancer is not my fault, but the source of my guilt - the pain I would cause my family and loved ones - would be my fault if I **did nothing about it**. As I learned from Sadhguru, responsibility is the ability to respond. I decided to respond to cancer with Awesomeness.

In the days to come, Reisha and I worked hard to find the right doctor to treat my cancer. This was a critical decision, and we wanted to make the right choice. It was a steep learning curve, and there was so much to digest. It was a decision that was left up to me, so I had to be on top of my game. There were so many questions and variables. Which doctor should I go with? Which hospital? Public or private? Do I do surgery first or start with chemo? This stuff was way over my head. I just did what I would usually do in unfamiliar situations. I listened, I asked what I could, I got the experts around me, and trusted my gut, just to get a sense of what was going on. By the 3rd of April, I had been to 3rd base with pretty much every doctor in Singapore.

Reisha and I were conscious that we had to act quickly. By the 4th of April, we had decided what to do. A lot of decision making occurs in the subconscious, and we woke up with our answers. Reisha was convinced that I should go to Mount Elizabeth in Novena, and I was convinced that I should do the surgery to remove the tumour first, before undergoing chemotherapy. We decided on Dr Dean Koh as my surgeon - his confidence got our attention.

7th of April - the first day of the circuit breaker in Singapore - was the day of my surgery. The lockdown measures meant that nobody else could accompany me into my room of the hospital. In the lead up to surgery day, I had been working out every morning, because I wanted to be as fit and strong as I could be for the post-surgery phase of my treatment. I knew it would be tough. Team Awesome was already at the hospital when Reisha

and I arrived, and we spent some time together, waiting for me to be called. When I was, I smiled at everyone and followed the nurse in.

“You can do it, Roh!” screamed my mother, with her hands together in prayer.

I walked away, chuckling to myself. Sometimes we laugh to keep it together. Also, it was funny. Throughout my childhood, whenever I had exams, I would come home, and my parents would ask me how I did. My response was always ‘I could do it’... only to fail pretty much every time. It was just such a funny moment when my mom said that to me. It was nice to leave with laughter. The only difference was this time I knew there was no failing. I got to my room and immediately took a nap, as my surgery was the same day. A few hours later, I was greeted by a hug from Reisha. The joy that overcame me is difficult to describe. Team Awesome had pulled some strings to allow her to stay with me for two nights. I’m glad they did.

It was surgery time as they pushed me away on my roller bed. There’s always a waiting room before you enter the operating theatre. The second surgeon in charge, the co-captain if you will, came to check up on me. We exchanged words and then went into the operating theatre. They knocked me out with anaesthesia and did their thing. The next thing I knew, I was waking up being pushed back to my room, fist-bumping all the doctors and nurses for a job well done. I got back to the room as Reisha waited anxiously. As far as I remember I fist-bumped her as well. I was definitely still drugged up. Reisha was calling everyone to let them know I was okay, and apparently, I was singing ‘Singing in the Rain’ to people that had called. I’m not sure why I was singing, or why that song. But I suppose life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass, it’s about dancing in the rain. The morphine didn’t *hinder* that process.

I remember waking up late at night, probably around 3 or 4 in the morning. I saw Reisha sleeping on the couch next to me. I felt

this serene calmness around me. An immense feeling of gratitude came over me. I started typing out messages on my phone that I wanted to send to Team Awesome and beyond, to show them how grateful I am for them. I couldn't ~~go through this~~ come out of this stronger without them. It's true what they say... it takes a village to raise a child.

The following day, Dr Dean Koh came to check in on me. He told me that I had to be there for 7 to 10 days, depending on my recovery. I asked him what I needed to do to be cleared for release. His answer was iconic.

"First you need to burp, then you need to fart, then you need to poop."

I made it my life's mission to poop.

I was out in 5 days.

It's an amazing feeling putting all your living energy into one goal. Tremendous things can happen. I realised that this was the first of many challenges I would need to meet - because up next was chemotherapy.

April - May 2020: Chemotherapy & Acceptance

On the 27th of April, I had my first chemotherapy session. The events leading up to this day were amazing. Reisha and I had been getting messages from many people, offering help, advice and love. It's incredible when that happens. It's beautiful to see everyone unite for a purpose, especially when that purpose is to help without expecting anything back. There is something special in just knowing that people want to help and care for your wellbeing.

That energy you get from them... hold on to it. It'll get you places.

A few days earlier, we had met with Dr Poon, my Oncologist. He had explained his intended treatment plan to us, describing the medication and its side effects. We asked him what it was we could do in addition to chemotherapy to help. He said getting 8 hours of sleep a night with deep sleep between 10 pm and 2 am was one of the most important things. I got right on top of it.

Dr Poon was a calm, collected man. He felt like your father or your grandfather, rather. He seemed wise, like he'd seen it all in life. He was very good at managing expectations. After a few words with him, off I went into a separate room filled with Barcaloungers. I was sat up and plugged in for a few hours. Reisha was right there with me. What would I do without her in life? We brought the iPad so we could watch a movie. We picked 'The Willoughbys'. I fell asleep about an hour in, which was expected, as they infused me with drowsy medication before the chemotherapy infusions. The session was about 4 to 5 hours long.

Once it was finished, they packed us off with a bag full of medicine to manage the incoming side effects. There was medication for everything, from nausea to insomnia. They put me on steroids for a few days to manage the side effects. Along with

the medication came a set of rules: for one week, no touching the fridge, no eating cold or hot food, only room temperature, etc.

Thus, began a trend of my freedoms being curtailed. This would continue as the treatment robbed me of more and more fundamental freedoms.

To me, life seemed to resume as per usual. I started incorporating a lot of Yin Yoga and Meditation into my life. Yoga was cited as one of the secrets of longevity in Ikigai (a concept I have been exploring, from Albert Liebermann and Hector Garcia's 'Ikigai'). I always loved Yin Yoga. It was one of the most relaxing and refreshing things you can do. Meditation was something I did as well, about 5-10 minutes every day. I was about to go deeper into Yoga and Meditation.

Week after week went by. I would go for chemotherapy every Monday and slowly, but surely, I could feel my energies depleting. My friend Ravin was kind enough to make a workout plan for me starting on May 4th. I followed it for about three weeks, before I realised that I wasn't anywhere near as physically able as I used to be. I had to come to terms with the fact that my physical capabilities were limited.

I was accustomed to working all day and working out twice a day. To go from that to barely being able to complete a workout, or a full day's work, was hard to swallow. It required a complete shift in perspective, and one that I was only beginning to understand. As I was going to find out later, we may be limited physically, but we are limitless in our minds and in our internal energy. This was important for me to learn as, later, more was taken away from me - to the point where I couldn't get out of bed. But we'll get there. I was just beginning to accept my new conditions, and I had to, because I could not afford the anxiety or stress that would come from the alternative.

Now, once I had begun chemotherapy, a vast number of resources began to pour in from all spheres of my and Reisha's

life. I consulted with Dr Poon (The CEO of getting rid of my cancer) about whether any of these would conflict with my treatment, before embarking on them. Here is an incomplete list of the treatments I have tried:

- Emotional Healers
- Aroma Therapy
- Crystal Healing
- Acupressure
- Craniosacral Therapy
- Nutrition
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Tai Chi
- Qi Gong
- Pranic Healing
- Meditation
- Breathwork
- Somatic Dance
- Mental Well-Being Coaches
- Homeopathy
- Naturopathy
- Traditional Chinese Medicine
- I could go on...

I stay open-minded whenever someone wants to help. Through the process of these various therapies, I started to realise the real power of healing. It was in the mind. If I genuinely believed that the person doing the treatment was trying to *help*, I often felt it worked for me.

The magic here was in the energy.

I don't mean energy as we know it to be - the kind that gets us to the gym - but the true energy that's within us and is transferable between people. Call it prana, call it chi, call it aura - whatever you want. Most of the time, going through these treatments, I would feel my blood flowing from head to toe, almost like a wave of energy transcending boundaries - intimidating the cancer cells within me. Ah, what a magical feeling that is; allow yourself to

believe it, allow yourself to feel it. You don't need to have cancer to understand kindness and love.

I wish I could sit here and explain every experience I had with every therapy I have tried, but that would take ages. We are saving it for the novel coming soon, to a bookstore near you (think: Deadpool credits). But you all know me: I am just a call away and would love to share more with you.

Back to the treatment plans. On the 27th of April, I began a course of treatment known as Erbitux. This is a behemoth of a treatment. It's an interesting medicine, not just because it is potent, but because the more it works on you, the more pimples you start to see on your body. I was beginning to look like Deadpool.

While we handled this well - with the help of a dermatologist - let me assure you that nobody told me that cancer treatments would make you feel like you were going through puberty again at the age of 31. I thought that part of my life was over. But alas, it was not to be. And I'm not talking one or two pimples. I was growing a mushroom farm on my face.

There was the second sacrifice... my stunning good looks.

Just after three sessions, I started to question whether Erbitux was my friend or foe. The pimples had spread all over my body. It was genuinely uncomfortable. I couldn't walk, I couldn't eat, I couldn't shower. It felt cruel - all the basic things were being taken away from me. It was physically painful to do these things. I remember coming out of the shower in disbelief as to how absurdly painful it was to clean myself. It felt like every water droplet was a small machine gun unloading all over my body.

That night, I gave in to the frustration. I just thought about how nice it would be to be able to walk my dog and hug my wife again. When you go through these times, people only see you on your good days; not many see you in these awful moments. It's so vulnerable. But I think accepting vulnerability is a sign of

strength. It shows that you understand how fragile the body is and how much the mind needs to do to care for it.

Beyond this point, though the treatments were taking more and more from me, I was in the zone, mentally. I had begun to explore breathwork, ikigai, the notion of mental freedom, the magic of Bob Marley's lyrics, the love of my family... no matter how bad the physical pain was, my mental state was, and is, my driving force. It is my ultimate tool for shaping my life.

Reisha and I began to explore the vast world of cancer. Not just the medical and scientific aspect of things, but the lifestyle. So many people around the world suffer from this condition and have learned and shared their perspectives on the matter on many platforms. We dived right in. This led to a powerful and critical shift in my mindset regarding my life and my healing.

Speaking to a member of one of these cancer lifestyle organisations over the phone, I was asked to recount my life's history, to figure out what had caused me to have cancer. I didn't think much of this at the start - who wouldn't want to know? - and in fact, I'd been thinking about it ever since I was diagnosed. But somewhere in the middle of recounting all the little details of my life, I was struck with a question, from deep within myself.

"Does it matter?"

I thought to myself; the *doctors* couldn't even tell me why I had this issue. *Modern Medicine* couldn't tell me why I had this issue, so how the hell was I or anyone else supposed to know?

Boom! The stress evaporated. And that is the power of acceptance.

While it's generally important in life to figure out what you've done wrong, so you can prevent it from happening again, in this case, it didn't matter. It would've led me to an endless journey, a bottomless pit, a black hole of unanswerable questions. It wasn't

like I was a smoker and got lung cancer, and frankly, it didn't even matter. The only thing that mattered in this trivial pursuit of answers was that **I must get rid of this cancer for life**, with or without an explanation for my cancer. Sometimes you don't get to know why strange things happen. But nobody can stop you from simply accepting the situation and taking responsibility for what is going to be **your** future. Remember: responsibility is the ability to respond.

Now is to be *accepted*. Your future is to be *created*. Quote that: 'Rohit Nanwani'.

June - July 2020: Self-Care & Wellbeing

By the 8th of June, I was beginning to find my physical condition borderline hilarious. I was suffering what I would describe as ‘death by a thousand paper-cuts’. For one reason or another, one of the side-effects of my treatment was that if I touched *anything* with my hands, they would get cut and begin to bleed. I couldn’t run my fingers through my hair without bleeding.

Fun, fun stuff.

By the 22nd of June, Erbitux had taken over me and I was physically incapacitated. I knew this meant that the treatment was working, so I was grateful for the toll it took on my body.

As I said, my mind was free, anyway.

But I realised that I had never really shared the extent of my physical discomfort with my parents. Some part of me still doesn’t want to, because I don’t want them to worry so much about this part of the process. If I follow through with the plan, I know that I have nothing to worry about. And while I know how mentally challenging this has all been for Reisha and me, what I will never really know is how this must have felt for my parents and siblings.

Telling them that I had cancer was an unreal moment for all of us. When I called my dad after the colonoscopy, when we’d found out that I had a tumour, he reacted calmly and stoically, as he always does. I asked him where my mom was because I was hesitant to tell her at first. But when he told me she was right next to him I knew that I had to. I could hear the panic in her voice as she told me “Okay, okay, don’t worry, Roh”.

My parents have been with me through every step of this journey, and they’ve always been calm, positive and attentive. You couldn’t ask for more. I believe that with the right support network, there’s no challenge you cannot meet.

On the 22nd of June, I didn't pick up any calls, and I didn't respond to any messages. And somehow, my parents knew that something was up. They showed up at my door.

By this point, I had undergone surgery, chemotherapy, another puberty, emotional turmoil, numerous therapies and all sorts of transformations. Still, Erbitux had knocked me down so low that when my parents entered the room, they found me sitting in the corner of my room clutching a Dyson fan towards my chest as I sat shirtless. They just saw me taking deep breaths. It felt like I had 2nd, 3rd, 4th god knows what degree burns. As I've mentioned before, I have a high threshold for pain.

This was my threshold.

My Uncle Haresh took me to see the dermatologist, who determined that - between the Erbitux infusions and my immunity being so low - I had contracted a bacterial infection in my skin. Deadpool wouldn't even understand. I had to get on antibiotics for two weeks, followed by almost a month of steroids to manage this - all the while, taking Erbitux once a week.

Once I was on Erbitux, I was out of commission for a month and a half. I mean total physical debilitation. There were no 'up and down' days. Dr Poon had decided to double my dose and wanted me to take it every two weeks instead of every week. Even he was starting to feel bad for me. Meanwhile, the dermatologist just wanted me to be done with chemotherapy already, because of the toll it was taking on me physically.

While it is difficult to imagine, I was at peace throughout this time. I had long since accepted that this would be the most significant learning experience of my life, and I knew that 'the unexpected' and the physically unendurable were simply elements of this experience. And I knew that I wished to remain present.

This all reminds me of a gathering that Reisha and I had in April, just after we'd heard the news about my health. I realised that I wanted to kick back and spend a fun night with some of my friends, so we each invited five of our best friends over.

They all came over, looking understandably sad, giving me hugs, that sort of thing. And I think they expected Reisha and me to be sad and morose too, but we weren't. We had smiles on our faces and were ready for some laughs. We just wanted to have some fun and laugh with our best friends and see people who were not doctors for a change. It turned out to be one of *the best* house parties we ever had. My friends went through 5 bottles of whiskey, while I watched them and listened, and most importantly laughed. It felt great, knowing I had them by my side, and knowing that I could always count on them to be there for me.

Towards the end of the night, one of my friends told me to mark my calendar and cross out the days until the chemotherapy was over. I told them I didn't want to do that, because it would feel like I would be just passing the time until it was over. And that would be six months of my life: not living - just counting down the days.

What kind of life is that?

If life is about experiences, this was always going to be a tremendous experience. There was no chance I was going to let it pass me by. I was going to be present throughout this whole journey, day by day, papercuts and all. I was going to make sure that I learnt everything this experience was going to teach me. And it taught me that to be present where you are is enough.

Sometimes the most challenging thing to do is to remain in the present moment. Physical conditions, emotional turmoil, stress - these can easily pull our focus away from the moment that we're in. But what I've come to realise - what I've come to remember! - is that the present moment is where life is happening.

Even if the present moment is where chemotherapy is happening.

Then, a magical thing happened.

When the hero hits rock bottom in the movies, they must prevail. They must bounce back. They must learn something, become something, unleash something deeper and stronger within themselves.

My rock bottom was silent. I couldn't get out of bed. Everything hurt. I figured I might as well just sit there and - for as long as possible - avoid real life. And as I shuffled between the bed and the couch for days, doing the bare minimum I had to do to get by (skin routine, nutrition, medicine), I realised that I had stopped living my life. I had begun to mentally cross the days off, one by one. And I learnt a valuable lesson.

There was a shift in my mind and my body. I changed from constantly thinking that I had to be a fighter (Roh the Hitman) to understanding and accepting that I just had to sit where I was and breathe through this part of my life.

I learned that to **be** was enough.

I had to remind myself to stop feeling guilty that I couldn't do more for the house, for work, and the people around me, because it wasn't my fault that I couldn't. I started to find it strange that even with cancer, I felt this way. How stressed out people must feel all the time!

Breathing became my outlet; almost my obsession. What choice did I have? If everyone wakes up with the power bar at 100, then I was waking up at -100, physically. I had no choice but to unleash my mind, the part of me that I know to be limitless.

I started by using Apps for breathing and meditation. I then moved on to courses on breathing and mindfulness. I was then

referred to a course by 'Art of Living'. And this led me to do 'Inner Engineering' by the Isha Foundation. I recommend these courses wholeheartedly - they unlocked a whole new aspect of life, wellbeing, and energy that I never gave thought to before. I spent so much of my life focusing on the power of the body, and when it came down to it, what got me through this was the power of the mind.

You may be tempted to call this a spiritual journey. And you wouldn't be wrong. What I mean, when I say 'spirituality', is looking inside myself and asking the right questions. Meditation and breathwork help me to do just this. Interestingly, it doesn't even matter whether I find any answers from the process, though answers do reveal themselves to me in this state from time to time. The key thing is to ask the right questions.

In this process, I felt grateful for my 'misfortune'. It has given me the opportunity to do what few people have the time or resources to do in this era of human life: to go inwards, and to focus on one thing at a time. I have learned that the mind is more powerful than I had ever been led to believe, and the spirit is truly indomitable.

There is an exceptional flow you fall into with practices such as meditation and breathwork. In this flow, because your focus hones the creative capacity of your mind to a sharpened blade, it *feels* like your energy grows larger, and begins to manifest and resonate in unexpected ways. You will be reading a book, and you'll have a conversation in which the exact thing you've just read will come up. One thing leads to another in a confluence I am comfortable describing as being magical. In this way, I have never felt more alive, and this is something I wish to share.

I have come to ask myself one question above all else, in this part of my life:

How can I help people live healthier and happier, for as long as possible?

July - August 2020: Maintenance & Beyond

On the 20th of July, I was scheduled for a PET scan. My parents brought me to Buona Vista to do this. We were quietly thrilled, as we knew it meant that Dr Poon wanted to show us the inroads we'd made through my treatments. PET imaging involves injecting radioactive substances into your body to visualise your body's metabolic processes. As a result, you're not allowed to go near any electronics, children or the elderly. It's comic book stuff.

Sumitra (my older sister) and Reisha came with me to see Dr Poon the following day for the results of the PET scan.

It was good news.

PET results are fascinating. We took a tour of my body from top to toe, and Dr Poon pointed out the tumours in my body, marked in red and green. Red tumours were most active and green ones were practically inactive. My CEA markers had dropped from 2500 to 12.9 micrograms per litre.

Dr Poon calmly said, "As you can see, the active tumours are minimal. So, we will continue with the chemotherapy as planned and we can start planning for maintenance."

As I mentioned, Dr Poon is good at managing expectations. We knew that if he said we could start considering maintenance, that this was a great sign. He wouldn't say this unless he was sure that it was the best thing to do. Everyone was thrilled. I smiled, trying not to get ahead of myself. I still had to go through 4 hours of chemotherapy that day.

On the 11th of August, Reisha and I went to my final session of intense chemotherapy. That morning, I woke up to a beautiful video sent to me by my family and friends. More than 40 people came together to show their love and support for Reisha and me, and it hit home with both of us. It was one of the most touching

things I have ever seen in my life. I firmly believe that you can get through anything with the right support system.

As Dr Poon explained, the maintenance phase of my treatment meant the end of Erbitux for me.

... No complaints.

Also, as included in a text which Reisha sent to Team Awesome and beyond, maintenance meant that I would go in for chemotherapy sessions less frequently (once every three weeks), and that I would get tested to check my progress every six weeks. More than anything else, Dr Poon emphasised that I should be stress-free and living healthily. It sounded good to me.

We went into the chemo room. I sat up, getting plugged in, while Reisha sat in front of me. She looked up at me, and I was smiling, with a tear running down my face.

“What happened?” she asked, concerned.

“Nothing,” I said, “...I’m just wondering how I got so lucky. And I can’t believe we’re here today”.

Between the video we watched that the morning, Dr Poon’s update and Reisha - sitting in front of me, taking care of me, as always - I was filled with emotions. There was so much gratitude coursing through my body - I couldn’t help but smile.

Reisha smiled back.

The power of a smile is incalculable. The power of positivity itself is incalculable. This was all so surreal. I went from IBS to Stage 4 Colon Cancer in two days. And, here I was, four months later, nearly rid of my cancer cells.

Walking out of the doctor’s office, I became aware that I was truly fortunate. I knew then that I would not take life for granted ever

again. I realised that I had changed, and that I wanted to continue growing, so that I could discover and experience Life for all its Awesomeness and be responsible, once again, for the people around me whom I love. The very same people who have been with me through every step of this journey.

In the days that followed, I decided to take a break from work.

The rationale was simple - Dr Poon mentioned time, and again that stress was a leading cause of cancer recurrence, and I did not want to take that risk. If there was no 'me' in a few months, then nothing I did now mattered. The reality of this decision, however, came from a truly practical place. As I've alluded to, and as I will discuss more the following section, living 'stress-free' does not mean turning your mind off from all concerns. It means designing your life around rituals, goals and experiences which you find value in. And while I do find my work tremendously valuable, the practical truth is that a lot of stress from work would be out of my control, and I needed a break from that.

Someone like me probably had to be strong-armed into this way of life, and I'm grateful that I was. Something called 'The Spoon Theory' (a notion popularised by Christine Miserandino) explains this unique circumstance best - and I would like to thank my sister Sandhya for sending me an extract of it.

The author uses The Spoon Theory to explain how chronic and debilitating illnesses limit energy. She uses spoons as a metaphor for energy and describes her day to day life as a matter of exchanging spoons for tasks. These tasks include everything that needs doing in a day, from 'going to work' to 'eating dinner'. Everything costs a spoon.

It may be difficult to imagine life in these terms if you do not suffer from such a condition, but believe me, chemotherapy presented me with a set number of spoons each day. I have far fewer spoons than I did before this treatment began. And my life

depends on me using these spoons in a manner which serves my ultimate wellbeing.

What I have discovered is that sometimes you don't choose how many spoons you get each day. But you always decide how to spend them.

In the days that followed, I found that adjusting to a 'stress-free life' was not as simple as it appeared. I believe there is 'good stress' and 'bad stress', and the bad stress is what I seek to live without. It's essential to understand and distinguish the two. Simply put, 'bad stress' is that which comes from events outside your control; from sources you do not choose or predict.

I was anxious for the first few days. I knew that there was still so much bouncing around in my mind, between work, family and friends, treatments and much more. I needed to come up with a plan - so that when my physical limitations slowly but surely disappeared, I would use the energy I possessed to their greatest potential, as I felt in my bones was the right thing to do.

I decided to do a few things.

First, I got rid of everything on my to-do list and calendar. I cleared all my e-mails, unsubscribed from unnecessary things, and marked myself as being out of the office. I decided to keep my phone away from me during the day and to check it no more than twice a day. This alone has been an immense change. I made a promise to be aware of and manage all the external factors that could make me anxious. I recognised that unwanted intrusions to my peace of mind should be avoided, because anything that stood between me and deep sleep required immediate attention. Sleep is powerful - bad sleep is powerful too.

Third, I decided that I would create a plan to build my overall capacities. I knew that I wanted to incorporate the things I have been learning into my daily life and realised that it was up to me

to make that happen. Nevertheless, I wished to do so with minimal stress, so I gave myself no time restrictions. The results of this plan comprise much of the following section.

Finally, I realised that I needed a passion project; something which I could focus on, in the meditative flow. Something which did not have a time restriction, either, because, of course, this is what flow is all about! It had worked wonders for me so far and felt like the most natural thing in the world, so I decided to go with my gut on this.

I was brought back to my central question:

How can I help people live healthier and happier, for as long as possible?

Well, I realised that I could begin by writing down my experiences and lessons. This passion project is what you are reading right now.

So, here I am.

I am four days clear of my first maintenance chemotherapy session, with eleven sessions to go.

I am more than a fighter; I am a student.

I am more than strong; I am calm.

I am thankful for Reisha, for my dog Ringo (who became my best friend throughout this whole thing), our wonderful parents, my siblings, my family, my friends, my entire support system & the universe. I could not have gotten through this without them.

But most of all, like Snoop Dogg, I would like to thank myself.

I would like to thank myself for always learning; for always fighting; for always breathing. I want to thank myself for making

good decisions in life and surrounding myself with only the best people and experiences life has to offer. I would like to thank myself for choosing the right partner in life. I would like to thank myself for knowing and acknowledging that I am, always was, and always will be, more awesome than Deadpool.

*

Before we move on to the next section, I'd like to show you a little bit of my support network: my incredible wife Reisha, our unsung hero Ringo and three wonderful contributions to this project from Ibby and Peesh. Ibby has written me a song, adapted from the iconic Fresh Prince of Bel-Air theme-song and Peesh has sketched me, Reisha and Ring. They are included at the end of this section.

Enjoy.

PS.

I have decided to include a list of “**Ten Crack Commandments**” (think: Biggie Smalls). I have intentionally left the last five on the list as blank - because I would like you to save and remember whatever may have resonated with **you** while reading this.

Here goes:

1. Your mind is truly limitless, so consciously live in the flow
2. Trust your gut, your support system and the universe;
accept that your responsibility is to make choices;
outcomes belong to the universe

3. Now is to be accepted, the future is to be created
4. Gratitude is the attitude
5. Just breathe. You are already more awesome than you think.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

*



Roh, Reisha & Ringo

Not all Superheroes wear capes



Peesh's Sketch

(To the theme of Fresh Prince)

*So, this is a story all about how,
My bestie Roh pushed cancer marker numbers down,
I'd like to take a minute just to appreciate you
here,
And tell you how you became the prince of an
island called Singapore*

*In Southwest Jakarta born and raised,
Between getting massaged, playing basketball, and
wearing Snapbacks is how he spent most of his
days,*

*Chilling out maxing, relaxing, all cool,
And shooting some B-ball outside the school,
When a stupid little sickness who was up to no
good,*

*Came and started causing trouble in his hood,
It was annoying and we all got scared,
But the prince was brave and told it to disappear
into thin air,*

*He fought and fought and sent most of it on its
way,*

*He gave her a middle finger and a one-way ticket,
He turned on Alexa and started to kick it,*

*Back in first class, yo this is mad,
Drinking LVL out of a champagne glass,
Is that people of Ascentia sky living like
Hmmmmm this might be alright,*

*But wait I heard they prissy, bourgeois and all
that,*

*Is this the type for a cool cat,
I'll see you when I roll up there,
I hope they're prepared for the prince of Singapore.*

Ibby's Song

Lessons



Painting by Sat Dhaliwal

***“Emancipate yourself from mental slavery!
None but our self can free our minds”***

- Bob Marley, ‘Redemption Song’

My Oncologist, Dr Poon, made it clear that the most critical factor in cancer recurrence is stress. That a stressful lifestyle causes more recurrences of cancer than any other non-nutritional factor.

Funny, that.

Mostly, you see stress being glorified as an ideal. As evidence of your insatiability and drive.

Apparently, it's fatal.

In my efforts to harness the lessons I have learned through my experiences with breathwork, yoga, meditation and reading, I have devised a schedule. I use this to manage my energy, allowing me to spend my time creating value and fulfilment in my inner and interpersonal life.

I have learned that you miss out more of life acting strong than you do by being strong and acknowledging pain; by acknowledging stress and what's blocking your shine. And why.

This section contains the lessons I've learned in my journey to acknowledge and grow in my strength, and to live not without challenges, but without 'bad' stress.

Here is my daily schedule...

A day in my life...

Sleep	Phase	Sleep 7-9 Hours
Priming & Movement	Morning	Appreciate Loved Ones
		Blood Flow
		Open Curtains
		Grattitude Water
		5 Minute Journal
		Breathwork
		Meditate
		Yin Yoga
		Training
		Morning Music
		Cold Shower
Nutrition		Gut Health
		Immunity
		Supplements
Wind Down	Evening	Plan Tomorrow
		Prepare Clothes for Tomorrow
		Eat Dinner by 7.30pm
		Electronics Away by 8pm
		Evening Walk (After dinner)
		Herbal Tea (Night Tea)
		Drink 3 Litres of Water
		Essential Oils/Aromatherapy
		Night 5 Minute Journal
		Read
		Sleep at 10.00

I have split up the elements of my day to day life into the following sections, in chronological order:

1. Priming
2. Movement
3. Nutrition
4. Wind-down
5. Sleep

I believe that living in the meditative flow is essential to living without bad stress. There is no 'best schedule' applicable to everyone, so I do not recommend that you copy my daily schedule. Instead, pay attention to the 5 phases above, and how they work together throughout the day. I will explain my references and key takeaways from each of these important phases below.

For a full list of resources, flip over to the Appendix.

Priming

Mornings are sacred. They are a time for priming the mind and body for the day. While most of us are used to priming our bodies for the day, in one way or another, I don't think we spend enough focussed energy on priming our minds for the day. The following is a summary of my priming process and areas of focus.

- **Gratitude**

- Appreciate your loved ones
 - Hug your wife and your dog, or your family. Show them gratitude
- Gratitude Water. Drink your water with gratitude
- Gratitude Journal
 - Write in your gratitude journal

- **Mind & Energy**

- Breathwork
 - Box Breathing
 - Wim Hof Method
 - Sudarshan Kriya- Art of Living
 - Alternate Nostril Breathing
 - Pranayama Breathing
 - Kapal Bhati (Skull shining)
 - Bhatrika (Bellow breath)
- Meditation
 - Asking the right questions & going inwards
- Blood Flow
 - Quick stretch to get the blood flowing to your brain (toe-touch + child's pose)
- Yin Yoga/Tai Chi/ Qi Gong (This overlaps with movement)

- **Others**

- Open your curtains
 - Let the sunshine in
- Make your bed
 - We all know about this one.
- Music Therapy
 - Play your favouring music to get you in the mood

I try to do this all in silence. It is important to me that I do not check my emails, messages or anything of the sort before completing my priming. This time is for me, and I respect it.

Movement

Movement has a tremendous impact on our day to day lives. For adults, movement reduces mortality from all causes, reduces cognitive decline, improves sleep, reduces anxiety and depression in both healthy and those dealing with psychology syndromes, regulates blood sugar, helps maintain a healthy weight and can help decrease pain. The following is a summary of my areas of focus in the movement phase.

- **Movement for Longevity**
 - Ikigai- the Japanese secret to a long and happy life, listed these exercises as the key to longevity
 - Yoga (Yin/Restorative)
 - Qigong
 - Tai Chi
 - Walking
- **Stretching**
 - Stretching is essential not just for your muscles, but also for circulation and stress relief
- **Mobility**
- **Strength**
- **Cardio**
- **Lymphatic Exercises**
 - Skip rope or trampoline.

As you can see, the 'mobility, strength and cardio' sections are left rather bare. I have identified them as areas to explore, and to focus on more, as my strength returns to me. There are more areas such as power, agility, etc. which I have left out altogether.

I choose to focus on these areas first and plan to incorporate more into my daily life as my physical condition improves. Most days during my treatment, walking my dog was as much movement as I could do.

Nutrition

I am confident that you are well aware of the importance of nutrition to your wellbeing. It is all the more critical for cancer patients, as cancer cells feed on specific nutrients (namely glucose, a simple form of sugar). Nevertheless, nutrition, in general, is essential to your energy levels, how they spread throughout a day, and therefore what you can do with your time.

The following depicts my daily nutrition schedule.

- **The Guideline**
 - No processed foods
 - Eat organic and freshly cooked food as much as you can
 - No refined sugar
 - Avoid
 - Gluten
 - Red Meat
 - Dairy (Unless probiotic)
 - *Basically, inflammation-inducing food
- **Focus primarily on**
 - Gut Health (Probiotic/Prebiotic)
 - Kefir
 - Kombucha
 - Yoghurt
 - Probiotic Supplements
 - Papaya Leaf tonic
 - Immunity
 - LVL Natural Immunity
 - Mushrooms

- **Followed by**

- Macros and Micros
 - Just eat good calories
- Cancer-Fighting Foods
 - Herbs
 - Nuts
 - Fruits &
 - Vegetables
 - No surprises here. Important to consume a variety of them.
- Foods to help with Chemo side effects

- **Hydration**

- Drink Lemon Water
- Drink 3-4 Litres of water/day

Wind-Down

This is the mirror image of 'Priming' and is just as important. Once the daily tasks are completed, and I have used my mind and body to create the value which I have planned for the day, my penultimate focus is on the wind-down. As the name suggests, this is when I slow down and get my mind and body ready for sleep. The following depicts my wind-down process.

- **Routine steps**
 - Prepare for tomorrow
 - Restorative Yoga
 - Walk after eating dinner
 - No electronics 2 hours before bedtime
 - Read a 'light' book instead
 - Finish eating at least 3 hours before bedtime
 - Drink herbal tea which induce relaxation
 - Chamomile
 - Lavender
 - Ashwagandha (Moon Milk)

Sleep

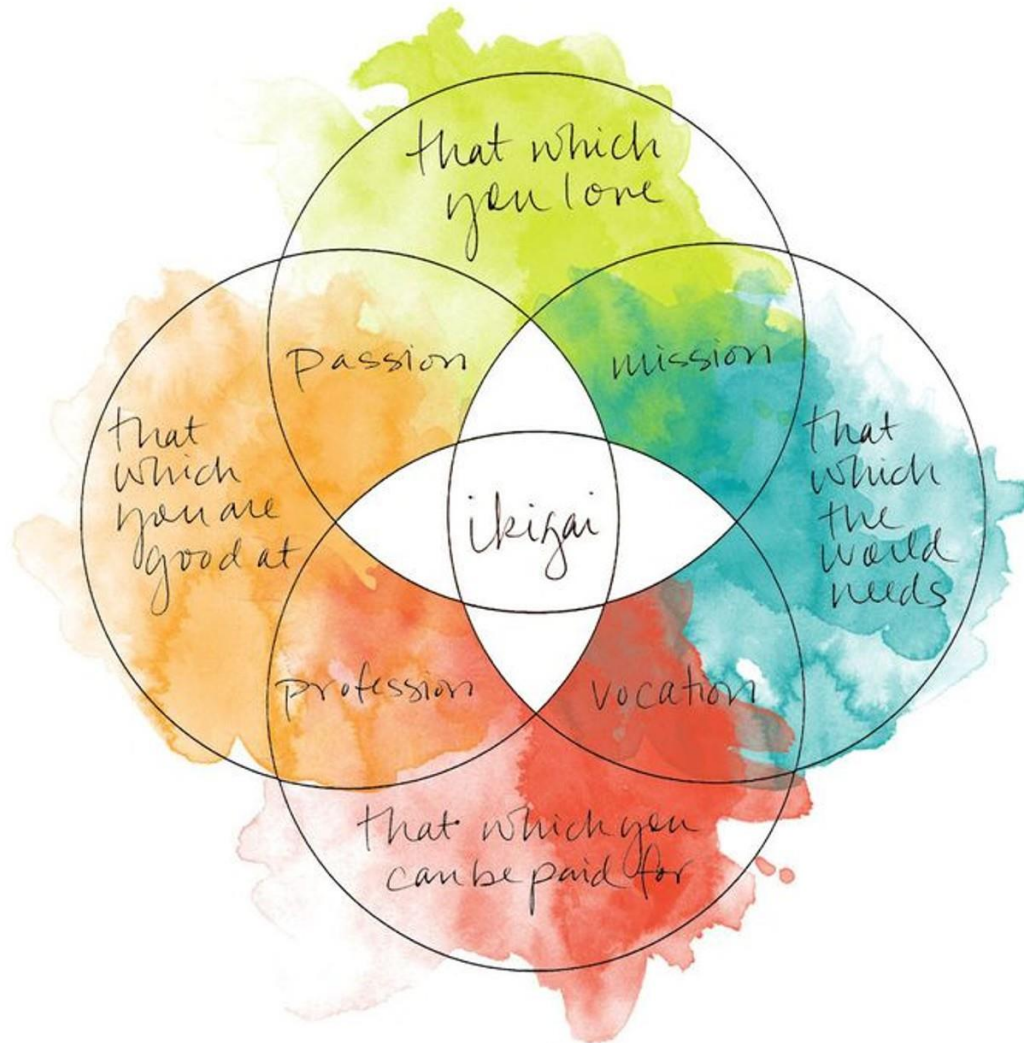
Sleep is critical to recovery and rejuvenation of energy. As Dr Poon informed me, the most important window for healing for me is between 10 pm and 2 am. He recommends that I be asleep during this window. The following describes the three basic phases of sleep.

- **Different stages of sleep**
 - **Light sleep:** Which is most like being awake
 - **REM (or Rapid-Eye-Movement):** Where our minds are asleep but active and where dreams are most likely to happen
 - **Deep sleep:** Where our mind is in “regeneration” mode

The goal, therefore, is to enjoy the ‘REM’ and ‘Deep Sleep’ phases of sleep during the 10 pm - 2 am window. I have found that my optimum sleep duration is between 7 and 9 hours per night. This figure reportedly varies depending on age and physical condition, but a consistent sleep routine - regardless of duration - has been shown to promote healing and overall energy levels.

In addition to nightly sleep, I have found that it is important that I take a nap of roughly thirty minutes in the afternoon, or do either Yoga Nidra or meditation, instead.

Appendix



“Now I know what success is: living your truth, sharing it.”

– Kamal Ravikant, ‘Live Your Truth’

People & Experts

Name	Position	Company	What they do	Contact
Natasha Mahindra	Yogi	Anamcara Yoga Retreats	Yoga Therapist	https://www.instagram.com/anamcara_yoga_retreats/
Luke Tan	Plant Based Trainer	Awake Method	Trainer & Plant based advocate	https://www.instagram.com/awakemethod/
Samara Mahindra	Founder	Carer	Integrative Cancer Care	https://www.carerforcancer.com/
Paul George	Life Coach	Carer	Integrative Cancer Care	https://www.carerforcancer.com/
Nikhath	Nutritionist	Carer	Integrative Cancer Care	https://www.carerforcancer.com/
Dr Dean Koh	Surgeon	Colorectal Clinic Associates	Colorectal Surgery	https://www.colorectalclinic.com/
Dr Poon	Doctor	Dr D.Y.H Poon & Associates Medical Oncology Clinic	Oncologist	http://dyhpoon.com/
Dr Priya Sen	Doctor	Dr Priya Sen Skin & Laser Centre	Dermatology	https://www.drpriyasen.com/
Yeow (Loh Yeow Nguan)	Founder	Health Partners	Wholistic Nutrition Therapy	https://healthpartners.sg/
George Jacobs	Founder	Health Partners	Wholistic Nutrition Therapy	https://healthpartners.sg/
Farah Safdar	Yogi	Kate Porter Yoga		http://kateporteryoga.com/farah-safdar/
Simona H	Yogi	Kate Porter Yoga	Yoga, Reiki, Hypnotherapy, Quantum Healing	http://kateporteryoga.com/simona/
Luke Coutinho	Founder	Luke Coutinhi	Integrative Lifestyle Medicine	https://www.lukecoutinho.com/
Ravin Vasandani	Trainer	Optimum Fitness	Physical Training	
Chris Apfel	CEO	Sage Medic	Cancer-testing	https://www.sagemedic.com/
Simran Nanwani	Founder	The Healthy Nutr	Nutritionist	https://www.instagram.com/the.simway/
Dr Steven Tucker	Medical Oncologist	Tucker Medical	Medical & Holistic Care	https://tuckermedical.com/#our-services
Karthika Thirugnanam	Nutritionist	Tucker Medical	Medical & Holistic Care	https://tuckermedical.com/#our-services
Dani Perreira	Yogi		Yogi	https://www.instagram.com/dinay_p/
Lisa Low	Yogi		Physiology, Rehab Specialist, Yoga Medicine®, clinical	https://www.instagram.com/lisalow/
Stephanie Bovis	Yogi		Yin Yoga & Meditation	https://www.stephaniebovis.com/
Kathy Gabriel	Yogi		Yoga & Meditation Craniosacral Therapy & Bodywork Sound	https://linktr.ee/dirtyhippieyogi

Tools & Resources

App/Tool	Good For
Insight Timer	Meditation
C25K	Running/Cardio
MyFitness Pal	Nutrition
Calm	Meditation
Headspace	Meditation
Ten Percent	Meditation
Shred	Fitness
The Ready State	Mobility
Ritual Anywhere	Fitness
Down Dog	Yoga
Smiling Mind	Meditation
Wim Hof Method	Breathing
Oura	Sleep
Sadhguru	Meditation
Nike Training Club	Fitness

Books

‘Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind’ - Shunryu Suzuki

‘Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfilment’ - George Leonard

‘Ikigai’ - Albert Liebermann, Hector Garcia

‘Man’s Search for Meaning’ - Viktor Frankl

‘The Power of Habit’ - Charles Duhigg

‘The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment’ - Eckhart Tolle

‘The One Thing’ - Gary Keller, Jay Papasan

Lastly, I would like to thank Nikhil Senan for turning my learnings and visions into a living story. Since I thanked myself like Snoop Dogg, I'll thank you like Dr Dre.

And since this learning isn't over... *'On to the next episode.'*



*