

My Journey with Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease

Awakening Your Positivity

Personally, I found the diagnosis of Younger Onset Alzheimer's disease was devastating, as it left me confused and uncertain of where I would be in the future. With no cure on the horizon, I lost hope and became apathetic in how I viewed life. However, after a chance trip to Japan, I realised that I now needed to create a new life, based on new dreams and new goals for the future.

This abstract aims to describe my journey in creating a holistic multi-modal approach that not only helps me to manage my health and well-being, but more importantly, it gives me hope for a better quality of life in the future. I choose the Tree of Life to represent my approach as I wanted to show that the four aspects of self (Body, Mind, Heart and Soul) are all interconnected by the same core theme – the need to remain positive through our thoughts and actions (positivity). Based on my own circumstances, I then created 'leaves of positivity' for each of these aspects. These leaves represent the daily actions that I have undertaken and the changes that I have made to my lifestyle. When joined together, they form my Tree of Awakening your Positivity. I believe the success of this approach, is evident not only in my positive outlook on life but more importantly on the quality of life that I am currently experiencing.

Abstract

For this reason, I believe my approach would be beneficial to many others who have a similar diagnosis to mine.

From my own research, lived experience and advice that was given to me, I decided that the only way to escape the 'darkness that was surrounding me' following my diagnosis of Younger Onset Alzheimer's Disease in July 2019 was to change my perspective on life. That is, I needed to develop a positive outlook (mindset) that would allow me to move forward towards creating a better life for myself. Symbolically, I choose the ancient theme of the Tree of Life, as a means of awakening the positivity that had now become dormant inside of me. From my perspective, this could only be achieved if each of the branches in my tree, which represent the four aspects of self (Body, Mind, Heart, and Soul) are reset so that they become balanced and exert a synergetic relationship with each other. The leaves of positivity, therefore, reflect the non-pharmaceutical interventions and lifestyle changes that I have chosen to bring balance to each of the four aspects of self so that they are in harmony with each other. With time, this will then allow me to develop a positive outlook where I have changed how I feel, react, and approach life. My Perx app will show that on the 9 June 2022 I will have been following my approach for just over two years (787 consecutive days).

refers to the complexity of our emotional nature and our overall love and compassion for self, others and the world.

Pets – my youngest daughter has two dogs which I regularly look after. Besides walking them every day, their loyalty and companionship brings a lot of enjoyment into my life.

Family – my family is an invaluable source of strength, reassurance, and encouragement for me. Without their advice and support, I doubt whether I would have the motivation and confidence to reach the milestones that I have achieved so far.

Friends/Work mates – fortunately, I am surrounded by a lot of friends who have supported & cared for me every step of the way. These include Craig Blake, Les Bobis, Mick Harrold, Simon Koch, Simon Yorke & Peter Yeates.

Professional Health Care Team – create a Professional Health Care Team that understands your physical & mental needs but can also help you monitor/respond to any changes that occur as this disease progresses. This includes: Consultant Psycho-Geriatrician - Dr Sushmita Hunter, Medical Practitioner - Dr Nicholas Bernard, Psychologist - Ashley Young, Pharmacists - Papandrea brothers (Len, Ralph & Sam) & Andrew Snow, Exercise Physiologists - Matt Donovan & Luke Stait.

Find your passion – you need to make time for the things that you enjoy, find relaxing & most importantly, you have fun doing.

HEART

refers to our thought processes which allow us to understand and make sense of the things that happen in our lives.

Challenge yourself – participating in master's Swimming & Surf Lifesaving is not only new to me, but it has allowed me to step out of the comfort zone that I had built around me. Not only am I helping to create and strengthen new neuronal connections in my brain but I feel good about what I am attempting to achieve.

Exercise your brain – everyday, I spend at least one hour keeping my brain active by completing word targets and puzzles such as Sudoku and Simon's Codebreaker. More recently, I have started doing wordle.

Reward yourself – to keep myself motivated & on task, I always take time to reward myself as a way of recognising a milestone that I have reached or a goal that I have achieved. This usually involves treating myself to something that I have either removed or restricted from my lifestyle.

Socialise with people – it's important to connect & interact with people. This is why I became involved in the 'Hello initiative' as I wanted to break down the feelings of isolation & loneliness that I was experiencing.

Neuro-cognitive exercises – my Exercise Physiologists (Luke & Matt from Empower Physiology) have designed a personalised neuro-cognitive training program that consists of a series of exercises designed to enhance my co-ordination, reflex actions & balance.

MIND



SOUL

refers to the essence of who you are. Reflecting our deepest values, it gives purpose and direction in our lives.

Enjoy nature – spending time in the outdoors has a positive impact on your mental health, well-being and resilience. This includes walking barefoot on the beach, swimming in the surf, watching waves crash on the rocks, walking through the bushland, listening to the sound of birds and smelling the flowers.

Acts of kindness – these occur whenever you do something for someone, usually without asking and expecting nothing in return. Such actions will make you feel better about yourself and the circumstances surrounding your diagnosis.

Look for the silver lining – this means, despite the impact of my diagnosis, there is always hope for a brighter future. I just need to look for a positive way forward in every aspect of my life.

Let go – in order to move forward, you need to let go of all the goals, ambitions & expectations of your previous life & embrace the new life you are now creating for yourself. Otherwise, you run the risk of holding onto your resentment, pain & anger, which will hinder your progress.

It's okay to stumble – whenever you follow a regimented program, there will be times when you stumble & fall. This doesn't mean that it's the end. What is important, is that you get back up, you are ready to start again, full of strength, determination & commitment to succeed.

BODY

refers to the physical aspect of you that interacts and experiences the world around us through our five senses.

Quality sleep – getting at least 7 – 8 hours of good, quality sleep every night is important as this is the time that your brain recharges itself, regenerative processes occur, and toxins are removed.

Eat healthily – an important part of living a healthy lifestyle is eating a well-balanced diet. Where I lean towards following a Keto diet, I also place a strong emphasis on the different anti-inflammatory aspects of the Mediterranean and MIND diets. I also consciously steer away from foods that are rich in carbohydrates and have a high GI (glycaemic index).

Keep active – exercise is a very important part of my daily routine. Besides strengthening your muscles and improving your overall fitness, it also increases the blood flow, which means my brain receives the nutrients and oxygen it needs to function correctly. Where I walk at least 3 kms each day with my dog, I swim on average about 8 – 10 km, and paddle a surfboard at least three times a week.

Winter rockpool swims – in the winter months (April to August), I swim in the ocean rockpools that are found on the Northern Beaches. As the cold water envelops your body, it causes anti-stress hormones to be released that make you feel invigorated, increase your alertness, clarity and energy levels.

POSITIVITY