

So I'm Tina.

These days, many teenagers spend most of their time worried about how many followers on Instagram they have, keeping up with their snap streak, or their plans for Friday night. And that's cool, that's normal. My experience as a teenager, however, was very different, in fact not normal at all. I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at 16. I more concerned with surviving it and making it through high school. Social media personas were quickly put into perspective and I, at 16, was forced to contemplate and reflect on life and death.

Thankfully, I was diagnosed with one of the most treatable cancers there is, and the survival rate is quite high. But many people when they hear cancer – think death; and I was no different. Cancer is cancer and I had it. I had 3 surgeries within 6 months; and even though it meant that I got out of exams that year, it was still a little draining. The mental battle with cancer, however, was by far the hardest thing I dealt with. It left me feeling severely anxious, depressed, and worst of all, alone.

Cancer is scary, it haunts you, and the fear of cancer consumed me. Even though my particular strain was by far one of the best types you could have, being told you had cancer is a scary thing – and it was that fear which consumed the way I saw myself and my body. I became a hypochondriac – and just one small change in my health – such as heartburn – I'd instantly think in some form my cancer was reoccurring. Even though there was a logical side of me who knew my cancer was very unlikely to spread, I would spend hours (and I mean hours) on end each night researching different types of cancer on WebMD because I never truly felt "healthy" afterwards.

Like I said, cancer is scary, it haunts you, and understandably it scares and haunts those around you. One of the hardest parts in my experience was that the people I loved most were also afraid and intimidated by the cancer. Their fear, intimidation and lack of understanding caused them to become distant – which was extremely isolating. When I told friends I was diagnosed, they didn't know how to react - so the conversation quickly shifted to who our latest crushes were and so on. So within my 3 surgeries and radioactive iodine treatment I had, just once did they come to visit – just once. This was when I noticed people pushing away because they didn't know what to say or how to talk about it.

But I find all people want is someone to talk to – someone to listen. I needed someone who could hear my stories and sit and listen and not be overwhelmed – or at least not appear overwhelmed – when they heard my unprocessed thoughts and feelings. I needed someone to help me hold hope and courage when I couldn't.

Dealing with cancer, especially at the age of 16 is tough. But dealing with it alone was the real battle and I didn't know how to ask for help.

So I had a choice to make: was I going to live with this ongoing fear, or live confidently and against it.

6 years down the road now, cancer still affects my daily life, but I've started to deal with it now by seeking help and seeking out a counsellor to prioritize my mental health. I'm not sure how it's going to go, nor do I know all the answers, but I'm choosing to live against the fear.

Now what you guys are doing is amazing – raising money and participating in the Ranking Run. Not only do all the funds raised stay in Niagara – but a good portion goes towards WellSpring Niagara which offers programs for patients, survivors, and families alike – which is amazing. It was exactly one day

before my Rankin Run back when I was in grade 11 that I was diagnosed with cancer – and that was the first time a run for cancer had meant something to me. So even if you aren't affected, I encourage you to raise funds because not only does money raised go to the new cancer center, but also towards the wellbeing of patients and families living with and beyond cancer.