



JIM HARSHAW JR.

Revealing Failure as the Path to Success

Success Through Failure Podcast

Action Plan Episode #221

Derek Fitzgerald

Derek Fitzgerald is a survivor of cancer, heart failure and ultimately a heart transplant. After receiving his life-saving transplant in 2011, Derek entered the world of endurance sports and became dedicated to helping others going through their own healthcare journeys.

Since 2011, Derek has upheld his life's mission to honor his donor's gift. He has completed over 90 endurance events, including a coast-to-coast bike ride and multiple IRONMAN races, including the prestigious World Championship in Kona, Hawaii.

He is the only cancer survivor and heart transplant recipient to ever complete a full IRONMAN distance race.

Quotes

"Every heartbeat that I have now is someone else's. While insurance can pay for the surgery, it doesn't mean that I earned the gift and it's my job to earn the gift."

"Nobody's promised a tomorrow."

"What are you going to do today? What are you going to do with the life that you have right at this moment? How are you living it to be grateful for what you have?"

"Perspective is a wonderful thing."

About Chemotherapy 14:15 - 16:00

"So basically, that first day of chemo, I've been interviewing oncologists with my job. I had no prior experience with anyone in my family having it. So there's nothing that touched me. So I sat down with this oncologist on the first day and he said, 'What do you understand about chemotherapy?' I said, 'Well, I got a pretty good understanding of the mechanics of it, but I've never been in this situation.' He said,

'All right. Picture yourself as an airplane, flying high in the sky.' I said, 'Oh, that sounds nice.' He said, 'Now, picture your airplane's on fire. Now, that fire is your cancer and what we're going to do with the chemotherapy regimen that we're going to put you through, those toxins are going to put your plane in a medically controlled nose-dive and hopefully through the sheer force and velocity of hurtling to the Earth, it'll put all the flames out. It's my job as your oncologist to be the pilot, to know when to pull back on the stick just before your plane crashes onto the ground and take you back up to a cruising altitude at which point, we will dust you off and check it out. If we got all the flames out, if we got all the cancer, phenomenal. If not, we'll make sure you're okay and do that same thing again and again and again, until we either have gotten rid of all the cancer or the body is to the point where it can no longer sustain the toxicity.' So he put it in a very easy-to-understand terms that I said, 'All right. Crap. Let's do this.'"

About Derek's Fitness Journey 24:22 - 26:45

"I was pushing 40 when I got the heart transplant. The last time I had been active was in high school. So with the heart came a level of gratitude to be alive and I knew I wanted to do everything I could to honor this experience and honor the stranger who had saved my life and given their heart to me. I was out of the hospital within 7 days. Usually, that's a much longer recovery. I was back home recovering on my own. Three months after the transplant, they let me get into a car and get to cardiac rehabilitation where I went from the old man hunched over walk to lifting myself up and walking where you probably couldn't tell I'd been through anything, to being able to do a slow jog. At eight months post heart transplant, I did my very first 5K run. I was just thankful to be alive. I would get out there and jog slowly. I'd work through and do my intervals. I started out walking for 9 minutes and 55 seconds and running for 5 seconds. Then I'd walk for 9 minutes and 55 seconds, and then I'd jog for 5 seconds. And then I slowly improved that, to the point I can do a slow jog of a 5K. Two months after that first 5K, I did my first half-marathon and I thought, 'This is fantastic. I've never done this before. Let's see if I can swim and bike and do triathlons. I went back to Team In Training where I'd been raising money for people with cancer and helping improve treatments there. I asked them about triathlons. So in January 2012, a year after my heart transplant, I learned how to swim. I bought myself a bicycle. By April 2012, I did my first Olympic-distance triathlon. A month later, I did my first half Ironman."

About Living A Life Beyond Money 29:18 - 30:55

"I was the prototypical workaholic. I used to have this motto that I was really proud of, which was, 'I'm going to work hard enough, long enough, to make enough money to do all the things in life that money can't buy.' I thought it was clever. I thought I was unique. I wasn't. I was putting off life in the crazy pursuit of short-term dollars that I thought was going to make my life better. And then I died a couple of times. It took me a lot to realize that life is a gift that's not promised. No one is promised tomorrow. I learned it the hard way. I hope people can hear my story and take it to heart - no pun intended - that life is precious and life is finite. When you put things off for a rainy day or for when you think you're more financially settled or you've got a level of success that you're comfortable with, life just doesn't work that way. People come up to me and they ask me, 'Derek, you've been through all this stuff. How does it feel to know that you could go at any time?' I say, 'I don't know. How does it feel for you?'"

About Derek's Perspective on Failure 36:07 - 38:00

"There's always self-doubt. But at the same time I'm stubborn. My last name is Fitzgerald. I'm as Irish as they come and stubborn is something I'm called a lot, both good and bad. I subscribe to a train of thought that maybe you're familiar with and a lot of people too. I have a hard time seeing setbacks as failure. When something comes up as a failure, as long as I learn from it, I'm moving forward. I can adjust. I can adapt. I can try something different. I can learn from each setback. The only time I consider myself a failure is when I stop trying. When the company who employed me folded into another company and wiped out my division, sure, that's a moment that could send anybody scurrying to their bed to pull up the sheet to their neck and tremble about what their life would look like next day. For me, I use that as an opportunity to start my own business. I've finished six Ironmans but I've entered nine. So I have failed. But each one is a learning opportunity to figure out how I can get better, how I can never feel this again and do that."

Derek's Habits 39:14 - 41:15

"Practicing gratitude and humility is something that I do every day. It's great to feel that you've got all this experience and you can tell anybody how to do anything. I am smart enough to know that I don't know everything. What I always try to do is surround myself with positive people that can help me reach the next opportunity that I'm looking to get to. So if you're the top hotshot in your job, then that's phenomenal. But you have to have the mindset of continual learning. If you find yourself sitting around a group of people that are bitching a lot and they're not necessarily providing solutions, you then need to be identifying people in your

workplace or in your life that you look up to. Maybe they've been through something similar and gotten to the other side of it. Just ask them if you can buy them coffee and pick their brain for a little bit.

The other thing is that I get a lot of people telling me about being able to see the forest for the trees and that sometimes, you can get so caught up in the day-to-day work that you lose track of the big picture. I try to be the exact opposite of that. I do map out my objective but once I've mapped that out, I lose myself in the work. I'm relentless in rolling up my sleeves and getting the job done. It doesn't matter if I think it's perfect. There's always room for improvement so I just do it again and again and again."

Action Item 41:59

"Make sure you identify your goal. As I said before, plot your path to that goal. Then the next thing you've got to do is just put your head down and do the work. If you don't know how to get to that goal, reach out to the right people that can help you get there, and take their advice. Always look to give the best of everything you can. If there are setbacks, remember that it's all part of the learning process."

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