

## Healthy teeth, healthy smile

Dentist gives tips on dealing with stained teeth. **The Kit, L3**



## Thirsty? Dust off that calculator

How to figure out sugar, carbs and calories in your favourite wines, **L2**

# LIFE

# A lesson on living in the moment

A father’s dementia sparks new perspective on the importance of appreciating life in the present. After all, what else do we have when all our memories are lost?



Elisa Birnbaum, right, cherishes the days when her dad has a flash of recognition when she arrives for a visit.

**ELISA BIRNBAUM**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

I knew the day would come. But it’s not like you can prepare for the moment your father — the guy who lit up every time you walked in the room, the man who would do literally anything for his little girl — looks right through you. He no longer recognized me. Or if he did, he simply didn’t care.

Then I felt it. The punch in the gut. With my father’s dementia progressing steadily over the past year, I know the feeling well. Every new “event” is followed by a forceful blow that throws you off balance, gasping for air. Punch. Punch. Punch. You’d think it would hurt less each time. You’d think the reeling would subside. It doesn’t. You just brace for it more readily. And remind yourself that you’re a middle-aged woman, no longer a child. And you can handle it. Except you’re not always sure you can.

My father was the go-to guy if you needed something fixed. He was the guy who debunked myths, rationalized unknowns. He had answers to all my science and technological queries. He tutored me in math, chemistry, physics (well, he tried). An electrical engineer by training, he understood how things worked. He built air traffic control satellite systems, among other complex projects. He took things apart and put them back together again. Just for fun.

So, when he couldn’t figure out how to install a SIM card in his phone while we were on vacation six years ago — and subsequently broke the phone in frustration — we knew something wasn’t right.

But, for many struggling with dementia, denial is a common defence, hope its trusty companion. And I’m a fan of both. After all, despite all the efforts into finding answers, we know little about how to prevent dementia or decelerate its progress. Had he been diagnosed early on, I’m positive depression would have overtaken his spirit, stultifying his steps, limiting his life way sooner than this horrifying disease could ever muster. So, if denial enables someone to live their last years with optimism, I’ll take it.

And so my dad continued to live his life, volunteer, exercise, read books, travel. A few years in, however, and the signs were clear. The jig was up. After numerous emails from my dad asking if I remembered his passwords, I started to subsume

**ALZHEIMER’S** continued on **L2**



# Developing an appreciation for the here and now

ALZHEIMER'S from L1

some of his financial responsibilities. My duties soon expanded to drafting “please forgive and refund” messages to a host of service providers — cruise companies, Microsoft, charities, Airbnb hosts — requesting a dose of empathy along with the money he had mistakenly committed.

It's been a tough journey the past couple of years, but it's given me a new perspective on the importance of appreciating the present moment, the little things, the here and now. After all, what else do we have when all memories are lost?

My father's dementia holds a particular chill for my brothers and I, following as it does the struggle our father's mother and brother both had with Alzheimer's. Our genes can empower. But they can also destroy even the best intentions, positivity be damned.

I find myself running literally from the probabilities — work-

ing out seven days a week, boxing, spinning, dancing, yoga, anything and everything to sweat out the genetic predisposition. And I'm donating all my charitable dollars to the folks working hard to find a cure. Maybe this one will finally do it, maybe that one will. I keep researching, giving, hoping.

But as hard as it's been on us, it is my mom — the primary caregiver — who holds the greatest burden. Despite the frustration and grief that comes with watching the demise of one's life partner of 50-plus years and meeting the never-ending demands that a dementia patient requires, my mom has faced her role with the strength of a lion trainer caught in the cage with a wounded animal, not 100 per cent sure of their next move, but realizing they have no choice but to face it head-on, doing their best to keep it safe.

My dad is a wanderer, so GPS tracking has come in handy. As have the police who, considering the rise in dementia cases,

are undoubtedly getting on-the-job training they never signed up for. Like his daughter, my dad has always turned to walking to clear his mind. Outside in the fresh air, under the sun, blue skies — there is no better way to maintain perspective.

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Though his walking is much slower today, his perceptions duller, my dad is still a fan of the walk. And when I can, I go with him, pointing out the beauty in our midst.

“That's a lovely tree Dad, look!” I'll exclaim, my arm firmly intertwined in his. A smile comes over his face. “Look at that flower.” “Listen to that bird.” He nods.

Twenty minutes later, we pass the same tree on our circuitous route back home, “Look at that tree!” he exclaims. “Yes, isn't it

lovely,” I reply, pulling him in tighter. Repetition is the new normal for our family. But, for my dad, it's about the moment. It stands still. In awareness. In beauty. And, yes, in pain.

Some days he looks at me completely blank, not sure who I am or the role I play in his life. Other days there is a flash of recognition. Until recently it was followed by a huge smile as he excitedly recalled my nickname. Those days are gone but the smile still emerges sometimes. And I have learned to cherish it. The moment.

Who are we without our memories? Without our past, our history? My dad has accomplished so much. But what matters now is the present moment. Just this. This bird. This flower. This tree. This singer belting out a song my dad is tapping along to.

This piece of music. A classically trained pianist, my dad has always serenaded family and friends and even played at weddings, cantorial concerts, thea-

tre productions (including my high school rendition of “Fiddler on the Roof”). Unlike all other skills in his repertoire, this one keeps beating strong, his hands deftly caressing the piano keys, the trills, perhaps not as quick as they once were, still quicker than most.

And it's a thrill to behold. So, I sit beside him. And I listen, nothing else competing for my attention. No cellphone, no twitter account, no assignment. There is just this moment. There is just now. My father and his friend, Mozart, his heart full. And mine, too.

And then there's this dance. My dad loves to dance. Put on a song and his slow legs start to move, his hips and arms follow, his condition an obvious betrayal of the soul that continues to stir beneath the confusion. “I love to dance” he exclaims, as a genuine smile expands across his face. Each and every time.

Yes, you do Dad. So, keep dancing. You lead, we will follow.