



Young Adult Series Growing Up With MS – Part 3 Episode 15

Host: Hi, welcome back to the 'Can Do MS Podcast'. This is the third episode in the 2019 Young Adult Series. If you have not listened to episode one or two, please be sure to go back and listen to those first.

Host: In Part 3 of these series, you will hear once again from Channing Barker and Psychologist Roz Kalb as they discuss what resilience means as a young adult living with MS.

Roz Kalb: I am very pleased to be back with you, Channing. And we have had the opportunity to chat before and a couple of other occasions if people can hear you on other podcasts, as well. But tonight, I am looking forward to talking with you about what resilience means to you in your life. Can we start with you telling us just a little bit about who you are and for our listeners who do not know?

Channing Barker: Yeah, so my name is Channing. And I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at 16, January 24th, 2006. I woke up with a numbing sensation on the right side of my body. My mom told me that it was from tanning too much. Because at 16, 'Homecoming Tan' is the only thing that matters to you. I went through a series of diagnostic testing and live with the disease ever since.

Channing: I am 30 years old now. I completed my degrees at the University of Arkansas and went on to fill my dream of being a morning show news anchor and reporter. Now, I work in government communications. I just turned 30. I have a house, a five-year-old dog who is the light of my life, and a great group of friends. I live in Northwest Arkansas.

Roz: The term 'resilience' is used a lot today. But, it means there are different things to different people. Could you talk about what it means to you today? And maybe how it came to have greater meaning in your life as you went from being a teenager to a beautiful young woman living with a chronic illness?

Channing: It is a really important question, Roz. Because everything changes in perspective when you are diagnosed with something. Until now, 13 and a half years later, I remember writing my college essay using the word 'resilience'.

Channing: Back when I was diagnosed and going through that period about that year and a half of living with it in high school resilience, to mean that jumping back quickly being able to almost like a rubber band-like spring back. I like that because I did not want to be brought down by this disease. It was all about getting back into things and getting back into my normal. What was my new normal? I had tried to adhere to that. Looking back now, that is a very slippery slope to me. Because what happens when you do not jump back so quickly or you do not want to jump back so quickly, right? Because now at 30, I have gone through maybe a little bit of the grief of living with this disease in the last couple of years. When you are 16 and you are diagnosed, you want to be back in everything. You want to be back in all of the social clubs you ran in

high school. You want to be back to normal. Because you do not want to be labeled. I was resilient in that space.

Channing: If you are going to that definition, I think of resilience at 30 a little bit differently. I think of it as when you are down and you are nice if that is the space you are in. And then, you plan your climb back up to wherever it is that you want to be. It does not have to be the top. Because I do not think that strong or resilient looks like being in the top all the time. I think it looks like recognizing where you are, taking it all in, and becoming a better person. The person that you want to be by feeling all of the feelings that you are taking it at that moment. It looks very different than it did at 16 than it does at 30. Because I think at 16, I just want to be back. I wanted to spring back. At 30, I am taking things a little bit slower. Because I want to understand why I am trying to get to the next space. I want to understand fully what living with this disease means. And kind of makes the edits to my life. So that I am not caught off-guard when I am unable to do something.

Roz: I think you are saying something really important. As a teenager, it was important to keep up your regular life and quotes, "Be it normal teenager. Do the things that other teenagers are doing." So, you kind of got back on the horse right away without actually dealing with the feelings around being diagnosed with a chronic illness. You just sort of putting those aside and kept going. Outwardly, you were being very resilient. The world was seeing a very resilient teenage girl getting right back into the swing of things. But now as a more thoughtful adult sounds, as though you redefining resilience as the ability to a little more processing emotionally and intellectually of changes that are happening in your life. And figuring out how you want to manage them and get yourself to a good place. It is more of a process. It is more of a — but it is really interesting.

Channing: Well, I think it is more of a process. Because like you said, I was outwardly really trying to show that I can do this and I can conquer this. And I was told so many times that "Oh, you are so brave. You are so brave." And I did not know any different though. There was no other — I had nothing to compare this to. And I think about when I was 27 or 28 is when I started to understand fully what living with this disease looks like. I was processing that grief. I think of myself as resilient now more so than I did at 16. Not that 16-year-old Channing was wrong in any form or fashion. Because that is all I knew. She was just trying to go to homecoming. Now, I am trying to fully understand where I am and get back on the horse. But, deciding what that means, how that looks, and how I can future a Future Channing can be resilient as well.

Roz: I have a couple of questions related to that sort of related. One, do you think that a more mature feeling of what resilience is that you have now took practice to get there? And did you find that you needed assistance from others either family, friends, or professionals to help you think through that process you now go through of trying to understand what the disease means and how you want to react to it?

Channing: I think I will answer question two. Because it answers to question one. When I went through seeing a psychologist and digging into why I was feeling the way I was feeling about 'X'. That I thought was completely unrelated to MS. It was not. And I have not gone through the grieving process. I also saw my friends go through very tough times and very dark times in their life. And seeing them, one of my dearest closest friends, that is incredibly strong. I think she is strong because she can show her emotions. She can speak with us and share with us how she was going through her grieving process. What I think resilience taught me at 16 was that I did not have a grieve what I thought my life would look like. I was unable to grieve the loss of what I thought live with MS was going to look like. Now, I can do that and have done that.

Channing: I think it is not — That kind of your question is to is tied to the fact that I had friends and family. That I saw go through things that I took bits and pieces from and was able to dissect why I was resilient or

what I was going through and grieve that process which I think made me a better advocate for myself and others with MS. I think I got to see the practice of others going through and learned by watching others.

Channing: I think also that it took failure trying to be resilient. It took failing at trying to put a brave face on at work when I was feeling super awful. And then coming home and just crying, being upset, and frustrated. Because of the loss of what I thought my life, a professional life, at 30 would look like.

Roz: You mentioned seeing a psychologist. For people who are listening, how has that played a role for you in finding your strengths or dealing with your grief or learning how to cope with this? How did the mental health professional work with you on this?

Channing: I would say that my therapy has helped dig deeper than on sometimes I wanted to. She asked the questions of 'why'. That I, through journaling or meditation, was unable to answer. Because I usually stop. And unabashedly just because I did not know that I could go deeper into a specific area. She has been able to dig into spaces that I thought. Well, that has nothing to do with MS. It would circle back to "Because I am afraid of not living this life. Because of this trauma that I went through at 16 that is still haunting me to this day. Because I did not deal with it at 16."

Channing: She also let me understand that it was okay that I was comparing constantly my MS to someone else's disease. We, as people in with MS, do this all the time. We are constantly saying "Well, I do not have ecstasies. I do not have cancer. I do not have — I am not one of divorce. Everything is really fun in my life." Do we quantify what we are living with? What we are dealing with is so different than everything else. They are dealing with the outside world was different from what we are dealing with. But, we do not need to grieve on what we are going through. She allowed me to space, to grieve, to be frustrated, and to be angry. I did not allow myself to do that.

Channing: Well, my favorite story from being newly diagnosed was I had this awesome teacher. It was Kathy Pickup. We just reconnected on Facebook not too long ago. I tell her like — I send her messages when I just feel like I need to tell somebody things. She was — I was leaving school that was after I have been diagnosed and I was using my cane. I was doing half-days. Because I was recovering from a relapse. My mom was waiting for me at the Circle Drive at our high school. She was helping me out with my bookbag. She looked at me. She said something along the lines of "How are you feeling?" I said, "I am okay. I am okay." She said, "Okay. Well, that is good. I hate that you are feeling that way. But, I also want you to know it is okay to cry. It is okay to be frustrated. It is okay to lean onto others." She told me that I was given the permission slip of I had 15 to 30 minutes every day, once a week once, a month once, or a quarter whatever it looked like to me that I could stop, be angry, cry, yell, scream whatever, throw my hands up in the air, be mad at God, and that I had to move on. She said that she allowed her daughter when she was diagnosed with diabetes. That was a real Saving Grace. I carry that with me so often. Because I think really everyone needs to know that they are allowed to do that.

Channing: You are allowed that space to be angry and be frustrated. Sometimes in society, we just try to get on and be positive. You can do that. Being awesome needs to go through the processing of living with something like this. It sometimes catches up with us off-guard. It can be Wednesday at 2 o'clock and I brain fog. It has been really bad. That is when I get emotional about it. That was one of the best pieces of advice I have ever gotten in my life.

Roz: What is so important about what you are saying is that you go back to your description of being a teenager, being like a rubber band, and wanting to show that you could bounce back right away. That is sort of an appearance of resilience. But, what you are saying now is that when you build true resilience and

practice, it has a built-in feature where you can feel all the feelings. You can even express the feelings and share them with other people. When we get into the anger and sadness, that what allows you to then move forward and be resilient in problem-solving and coping. I think the practice has worked. You have learned a lot from the people around you. I think that is a wonderful lesson for people. One more example and I am hoping you will be willing to talk about it. I know you had always dreamed of being in the news world and being an anchor. That was something that was just from childhood you wanted to do. You fairly recently had to make a major change. Could you just talk about how that fits into this definition that we have just come up with now of what resilience means to you?

Channing: Absolutely. So, you are right. I always want to be a news anchor. When I achieve that goal, it was awakening to me. But, It also was really — my health was not the greatest. I had to make this decision of, "Okay, where do I go from here?". I want to keep my health because careers come and go. But my health is what is the one thing I have control over. It was like I had to step back and say thank you to the universe that thank you for letting me achieve this. I am ready to move on with my next goal and ambition. It was a moment of gratitude and also a life edit. I think it is really important to allow yourself to make those life edits. Because I think women, especially, we make these life plans at 17 that we want to stick to. Some of those are very valid. And some of those were also unrealistic.

Channing: When I realized that my health was not improving. My health was not my top priority. Because the news business is extremely taxing on you. I just was able to take my talents and my job skills and transition them. Sometimes that is why I think life is about transitioning from Point A to Point B. Maybe it takes you to point B.2 well B.8 to get to Point C. I think it is just editing its way.

Roz: And that, for those of you who are listening, is one of the most wonderful definitions of resilience I have heard as a psychologist. Thank you, Channing, very much for sharing so openly what your process. It was recognizing your resilience and fostering it.

Host: Thank you to our listeners. We appreciate you tuning in to the Young Adult Series. If you enjoyed the Young Adult Series, please make sure to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. And of course, we would like to thank all of our sponsors for supporting the Young Adult Series. A huge thank you to Biogen, Celgene, Genentech, Sanofi Genzyme, and Novartis for their support. For other great resources, please make sure to check out our website cando-ms.org.

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