

Choosing to Live

Category: Grit

written by Lori Caruso | January 31, 2025

“Would you do it again?” my husband’s friend asked. Gesturing to indicate the weight of the decision, Dan held out a hand and said, “On the one hand, I needed 10 liters of oxygen 24/7 and probably wouldn’t last six months.” Then he held out his other hand and said, “Or a double-lung transplant. I chose to live.”

Dan had lived with scleroderma for 20 years, dealing with daily pain and countless medical procedures, while the autoimmune disorder gradually destroyed his lungs. But he loved life and was determined to keep going.

Transplant patients are informed about the serious risks involved in the procedure and what an average hospital stay might look like—two or three days in the ICU and two or three weeks in recovery, if you’re lucky. Dan chose to stay positive. He wanted to believe he’d be lucky.

Two days after surgery, waking from sedation and strapped to his bed, he bit through the ventilator tube. Doctors decided to let him try breathing on his own, but within a few hours he had to be re-intubated. Undetectable prior to surgery was a bacterium deep in one lung that grew into pneumonia. It was clear: recovery would be an uphill battle.

After trying and failing again to breathe independently, Dan had a tracheotomy. A small tube, surgically placed in his windpipe, offered a safe way to wean him off the ventilator. Dan was ready to start improving.

His days became a revolving door of doctors, nurses, and respiratory and physical therapists. He had blood work several times a day, chest X-rays, bronchoscopies. Secretions constantly needed to be suctioned out. He was nauseated and lightheaded.

For weeks, he was lifted from his bed to a chair with a ceiling-mounted truss. The physical therapist brought in a machine he could pedal in bed. Eventually, he was strong enough to stand, then walk. After one month he left the ICU, moving to the recovery floor. Things were looking up! Then one morning, he struggled to breathe. A bedside X-ray showed a “whiteout”—a collapsed lung. A technician pumped a football-shaped device fitted over Dan’s face to reinflate the lung. He returned to the ICU but somehow stayed positive.

Three weeks later he left the ICU, but the lung collapsed again. And there was a new complication. Tests showed his kidneys were failing. Ten weeks post-transplant, he was back in the ICU, on dialysis.

Dan fought for his life through many dispiriting setbacks. But he never gave up and, with his new lungs, got stronger. Finally, after nine months, he made it home.

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