

SPIRIT

Return to 'Normal' Rodeo

BY DAN SHAPIRO, PHD

The rodeo comes to Tuscon, where I live, once a year. Bandannas adorn the young and old. There's more flannel and belt buckles at the grocery and video store than you see the entire year. The pickup-truck-to-minivan ratio goes way up, and you are far more likely to hear people yell "Yeeeeee Haaaaa" at inappropriate times.

My wife, Terry, and I are both survivors. It's occurred to me that getting life back to the new normal after cancer treatment is similar to a rodeo; there are specific skills we need to thrive and many of them are as challenging as riding a bucking bronco.

If we inaugurated a "Return to 'Normal' Rodeo" you would probably recognize many of the events—you may even be a contender.

Let's stage the Return to Normal Rodeo at a showground with announcers and bleachers and popcorn. For good reason, only the toughest among us would enter.

Event No. 1

The first event in the Rodeo is the Wig Gauntlet. A timed event in which style points are assigned for keeping one's wig centered and FANTASTIC, this complex skill test simulates a formal office cocktail party and has three stations. Dressed in a tux and tails or ballgown, you must cope with gusting wind (simulated with a smallish jet engine); an overly aggressive hug from Skip, the hair musing 6-foot-10-inch ex-football player from the sales department; and six ex-beauty queen wives interrogating you about your hair products and your fashion stylist with such questions as, "Your hair is sooooo cute, what salon do you go to?"—all while crammed in a small women's bathroom. The winner in this event would be the first to run the gauntlet with nary a wig hair out of place.

Event No. 2

The next event, the Chemo Brain Bonanza, stands as a vicious test for even the most seasoned cancer cowboy. Here you must recall your five closest friends from high school and the streets they lived on. Then you have to make a shopping list of 10 items that you will retrieve one hour later—without the list. I know, it's brutal.

Event No. 3

The third event in our Return to Normal Rodeo will be Bathroom Riding. It pits contestants against a house full of adolescent daughters for control of the family bathroom on a Friday night so your wife can get ready for your first post-treatment date—with her new wig. Here's the tricky part: The adolescent girls are also preparing for a night out and they cannot see your wife bald. I can hear the announcer now ... "That was a fine ride, Sparky. I have an unofficial time of 1 minute 24 seconds before they dragged him out. He was clinging to that sink pretty good, wasn't he? Nice technique, that's gonna be a tough time to beat, those kids are mean tonight."

Event No. 4

For the fourth event, we have the Temperature Adventure, which is designed to simulate hot flashes while you are in the midst of asking for a raise from your meticulous boss. While your body appears to have been dunked in liquid nitrogen and then in boiling oil, you get points added or deducted based on successfully navigating questions about sweating and your company's financials.

Event No. 5

Like the Wig Gauntlet, the fifth event—the Concentration Melee—also has three substations. The Concentration Melee takes place one day before you receive results from your first post-treatment follow-up scan. At the first station you must read and digest the last hundred pages of *The DaVinci Code*. A 50-item, fill-in-the-blank test is then administered. Next you have to pay a stack of bills by correctly endorsing all of the checks and separating fake bills from those that are legitimate (such as from the Guinea Pig Rescue Fund). Finally, you finish the Concentration Melee by helping a hyperactive 12-year-old with her algebra homework. Don't worry, we'll always have emergency medical crews on hand.

Event No. 6

The winner of the sixth event, the dreaded Managed Care Relay, will be the first person to successfully get rid of an errant charge from his or her medical bill. Contestants, who are given a pay phone and one roll of quarters, are eliminated for screaming, flailing, or having a seizure. (This is also a no-handgun event.) Fortunately, the relay tends to be slower than a cricket match, so tickets are easy to come by.

Event No. 7

Next, we have the Future Test, where entrants have to make holiday plans for one year from today, including providing a sizable down payment. For example, you can book a cruise, reserve an R.V., or make plane reservations (without trip insurance). Talk about gutsy! Style points are awarded for bold vacations such as climbing Mount Rushmore, scuba diving a submarine wreck, or kayaking Niagara Falls.

Event No. 8

Last but not least comes the Small Talk Event, where the brave contestant has to drive to work worried that the pain in her upper arm signifies a relapse, and then, after arriving, convincingly talk about the weather for 15 minutes with blathering coworkers. This is rated and judged by a team of psychologists, psychiatrists, and your English teacher from seventh grade. The announcers might whisper, “She’s doing great! Her introduction of cumulus clouds and pressure systems was really first-rate! She’s sure to be in the money with this mindless monologue, but oh no, she’s rubbing her arm, the judges won’t like that!”

I don’t care a whit for a man who can rope a calf or stay atop a bull. After the challenges of getting back to normal after cancer treatment and then watching my wife do it also, I know it was harder than riding a bull for a few seconds—although it may be akin to being run over by the bull. That’s why I’d worship the winner of the Return to ‘Normal’ Rodeo. I’d join her or his fan club and be the first to buy the coffee mug, umbrella, or T-shirt that says: Survivorship—I Conquered the Real Bull.

Yeeee Haaaaaa.