

Why there are no big milestones to achieve in my life

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I have noticed that very often people seem to want more and more and don't take the time to realize and appreciate what they actually have. In our early 30s, my husband and I had it all: promising careers in health care, a beautiful baby girl and a new house. We had sacrificed many years living in cramped apartments with little pay in order for my husband to complete his residency and become a doctor. Our hard work was finally paying off.

Now, living in a nice neighbourhood in midtown Toronto, I was completely absorbed in the idea of "keeping up with the Joneses." It's not that I don't have good values or appreciate things, but I was caught up in the excitement of our successes. I was never going to have to worry about money, security or providing for my children's needs.

Then, in minutes, my world crashed around me. My husband had a seizure while picking our daughter up from daycare. He was diagnosed with an incurable brain tumour.

My husband is going to die young. We are not going to grow old together. The moment of diagnosis was the saddest and darkest time of my life. Not where I expected to be at 32. Why was this happening? What did we do to deserve this? Our life and our future were being taken from us. Why?

After the shock and the grieving came the anger. I couldn't talk to my friends. I withdrew. I was envious of their healthy husbands and their vacations and their bigger homes.

All those things I thought should have been mine as well. This was my life and it was filled with a constant feeling of dread. I hadn't signed up for this.

I remembered how sad I had been when my grandmother died at 60. I thought about how many milestones she'd missed: birthdays, holidays,

grandchildren, great-grandchildren. Now I contemplated all the life moments my husband and I would not be able to share – our children’s birthdays, little moments of hearing them belly laugh, drying their tears. And then, at some point, the anger and the pain went away. I knew I needed to refocus.

When people look for answers, some turn to God and some turn to family. I turned to Google. Desperate to find a path that could lead my family through this unknown territory, I stumbled across an article about terminally-ill 30-year-old men and their biggest regrets.

It revealed that their biggest regret was that they had worked too hard and not spent enough time with their family. It wasn’t the material things – the house, the cars, the expensive schools. I realized that my husband and I had to change. We needed to start taking the time that remains to us to enjoy each other and our children.

And this is how we survive.

I’ve decided I can’t control our fate and what’s happening. But I can control how I deal with it. This hit home when my husband was told point-blank by a doctor that he will not be here to walk our daughter down the aisle. We decided to make sure we walk her to school every day and that he reads her a story every night.

In the five years since his diagnosis, we have had two more children; and my husband is there, teaching them how to ride a bike, playing with them every moment he can. There are no big milestones to achieve any more. A good day is now our sole benchmark for success.

We focus on each day. We focus on today. I wake up in the morning and if my husband is feeling well – it’s a good day. We have put our energy into the moments of now.

I’m no longer envious of other people’s things, but I am envious of their future, the time they will have with their partners and children, together as a family.

My diamonds now are his words and texts: “I miss you,” “I can’t wait to see you later,” “You’re a wonderful wife and mother.” My fancy trips are going to the park or the zoo. Our big-occasion dinners are our children’s birthday

parties. Our romantic weekly date is Chinese takeout and popcorn. Instead of buying gifts to say thank you, I practice a daily ritual of making someone feel good with a compliment.

My relationships are now my prized possessions. I'm not saying that I no longer appreciate the finer things in life, but they are not where I find my happiness or fulfillment.

Happiness is going for a walk with a friend, chatting over coffee, having a shoulder to cry on. No amount of material possessions can provide that kind of comfort.

Would I have appreciated this knowledge had this not happened to me? I can't honestly tell you I would have.

Today, I have a husband who loves me unconditionally and tells me that daily. I have children who keep me going and keep me strong for the darker days ahead. And I appreciate my friends in a whole new way. I have learned that I am richer now than I would have been had things gone as planned. I thought I needed "the more" in life, but what I realize is that I needed less.

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