

EPISODE 217: CASEY WHITE - RESILIENCE

Casey White

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Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Success today requires resilience. Whether it's a company dealing with a major shift in the market or an individual faced with a significant personal or professional obstacle, resilience is a requirement. Casey White knows all about resilience. A young, fit, working professional at the start of her career, she became unexpectedly and critically ill and began a lengthy fight for her life that would ultimately take away her ability to walk. Now, five years later, her life and career are back on track. She credits much of her amazing recovery to resilience. She joins us to talk about the lessons she learned about resilience. Now, before we listen to our conversation with Casey, I should point out she's my daughter. My wife and I have three daughters. Casey is our oldest.

Ken White

Casey, thanks for being with us. I appreciate you sharing your story.

Casey White

Yeah, thank you for having me.

Ken White

And it is an incredible story. Do you remember the beginning? What beginning do you remember when it all began? What goes through your mind?

Casey White

I think in my mind, when I think about when did this start? There was one very specific moment. I had already reached out to you and Mom and said that I was really unwell. I had a fever of 104, 105. And obviously, that is not normal. But I didn't really understand the extent of what I was about to deal with until one morning, I was in my apartment, and you and mom were there, and I went to walk from my bedroom into my bathroom. And when I got to my bathroom, I knew that I was about to fall. And I sort of thought I had stood up too quickly, that I was lightheaded, that I was losing consciousness. And that's why I was about to find myself on the floor, and as I laid on the floor, I realized that I had memory of that whole fall. I was fully aware. So it wasn't that my brain had given out. It was that my legs had given out. And as I laid on the bathroom floor and I realized that I couldn't get back up. And that's when I knew this was different, and I was in for something very different than just the flu or a fever like I thought I was having.

Ken White

Yeah. Because initially, doctors thought when first time to the ER, it might be a virus, but at that moment, you knew it was a lot worse than that.

Casey White

I did, and I don't think I wanted to accept that, but it sort of stuck in the back of my mind of, we're getting ready to start something.

Ken White

No kidding. Yeah, that's the understatement of the year. I mean, you were hospitalized for the better part of a year, and most of that, not knowing what was going on. They couldn't figure out why this incredibly high fever, why your resting heart rate was double where it should be. What are your memories from that, being in the hospital?

Casey White

I don't have very coherent memory of that time. So I know that I was in the hospital for six months. I know that most of it was in the intensive care unit. I do know that, at some points, I was on the cancer floor. I don't really remember the context of the switching, but I largely remember the emotions. It is so isolating and so terrifying to be in the hospital for that length of time and also to not know what's going on. Right. And there's this sort of external locus of control kind of thing happening where you don't get any agency over any of the decisions. Right. I, as a patient, just had to go along with what the doctors were saying. And so it was really a lot of fear, a lot of exhaustion, a lot of pain, but I don't necessarily remember a timeline of events.

Ken White

And in a relatively short period of time, you had lost half your body weight. You were down to 62 pounds at one point. But then, after a few months, there was a bit of a breakthrough.

Casey White

There was. It took at least half of my time in the hospital to start figuring out some answers. I think initially, doctors were trying very hard, but it was just a really baffling situation, I think, to everyone involved. But eventually, we received the news that I had early-stage Hodgkin's lymphoma, and we started chemotherapy. Not long after starting chemotherapy, we also discovered that I appeared to carry a gene for a very rare autoimmune condition called hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis, or HLH. And part of the problem of having the Hodgkin's lymphoma and HLH simultaneously was that they both had caused my immune system to turn on myself. And that explained the really high fever, that explained the rapid weight loss, that explained the weakness in my legs. And as heartbreaking as it is to hear you have cancer, it was an answer, and that was something that we had not had for the first three or four months of my time in the hospital.

Ken White

Yeah, and the chemotherapy knocked your fever down a little bit. I remember what a huge victory that was. But, yeah, there you are at half your body weight. You have somewhat of an answer now. And at what point do you recall them saying, you're not going to walk?

Casey White

I'm not fully sure if I actually remember this conversation or if I just remember knowing that we had had the conversation, but I do know that doctors had come in and said, we know what's going on now. And the good news is that we can treat you. The bad news is that you're not going to walk again. And at that point, I was 23, and I had been an athlete my entire life. I was a personal trainer in college. And to hear, at 23, you'll live, but you're not going to walk sounded worse than you're not going to live.

Ken White

Yeah. So you kept fighting. You hung in there. You eventually got to a skilled nursing facility for a while. What was that like?

Casey White

Skilled nursing is intended to be physical rehab. Right? For patients who have experienced a change in mobility in their time in the hospital. So the intention was that I would go to the skilled nursing facility, do extensive inpatient physical therapy and occupational therapy, and then I would be a little bit more functional, and I could go

home and start living my life in the new normal. Unfortunately, I was still so sick. I still had cancer. I think when I was there, I still weighed. Maybe I'd gained a couple of pounds and weighed 65. So largely, what my stay in the skilled nursing facility was for was caregiver training to make sure that you knew the level of care you were going to need to provide for me because I was not capable of doing anything at all for myself. I was fully bedbound. I could not feed myself. I couldn't brush my teeth. And so rather than really teaching me those skills, it was teaching you guys how to help me.

Ken White

So, not fast-forwarding seems like the worst thing to do. But let's fast forward. So here it is, five years later. What's life like now for you?

Casey White

I think I'm going to answer this in a way that would have shocked me five years previously. But my life is very normal. I am in a wheelchair, so I'm now what's classified as an incomplete paraplegic. So I'm not able to walk, but I do have a little bit of feeling and movement below my legs or below my waist. So, I do use a wheelchair, but I live on my own. I have a job that I absolutely love in medical sales that actually allows me to pull on my experience as a patient and my time in the healthcare system. I'm a competitive rower. Again, I think largely my life is pretty normal. It's just that I sit down.

Ken White

Yeah. But after all of this, as you were recovering and you were in an apartment, you had your job, you're driving, you're living and going everywhere with Roxy, your dog, and living life, you and I looked back and said, there's some lessons here. There's got to be some lessons here. And as a result, we've come up with some. That's really the point of having you here today, is to share those lessons and how people can be resilient and how they can, in fact, overcome unbelievable odds and unbelievable hurdles. And you've got them into two different sorts of categories: mindset and action items. Let's start with the mindset items. And you have three of them. And the first one is understand human potential.

Casey White

So when I say understand human potential, what I mean is embracing an unlimited ability. Embracing the idea that humans have an unlimited ability to achieve, right? And I think often we hear stories about people doing something really incredible, right? Climbing Mount Everest or running a marathon or whatever it is. And I think that we tend to see those stories and think that there must be something extraordinary about the people that are able to do things like that. I think that what I have found, and even in sharing my own story, people will hear the story and say, I could never do that. My first instinct is to say, well, why not? Right? Of course, you could if you had to. And so, while I was able to unlock sort of this belief in my ability to achieve because of an

incredible challenge, I also think that it can be unlocked with a passionate and limitless belief in yourself. And I think that's sort of what carries me through now. So we're five and a half years later, and I honestly can't say that I've encountered an obstacle that I haven't felt like I can meet head-on and overcome.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Casey White in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The Financial Times, Bloomberg Businessweek, Princeton Review, and US News and World Report have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the US and the world. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has world-class faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with Casey White.

Ken White

Your second mindset item to help people understand and embrace resilience; number two is think your way to success.

Casey White

Exactly. So I think that your mind plays a big part in whether or not you're successful. And to me, thinking your way into success has two aspects. One is focus, and one is control. So, first of all, I think it's absolutely key to define your success clearly. You then, though, need to devote 100% of your mental energy, so your thoughts and your self-talk to achieving that goal because you can't think about more than one thing at 100% simultaneously. So you need to be able to block out the noise and then control. Something that I learned as an athlete growing up was the phrase control the controllables. So, in life, there are always going to be circumstances that are outside of your control. For example, in my story, the Covid-19 pandemic fell right in the middle of my recovery. And there was not one thing I could do about the fact that it was happening, how long it was going to be a thing that I needed to contend with, but I could control how I reacted. And so that's what I mean when I talk about control, understanding that there are going to be things outside of your control, and knowing that you can control the way that you respond.

Ken White

Mindset item number three: realize the journey is going to be somewhat mundane.

Casey White

Yeah. Unfortunately, the road to success can feel very mundane. It's often very slow and it's also not linear. And that's a huge reason, I think, why people give up. Because to

achieve success requires an intensity, a repetition, and a focus that is honestly not glamorous. And so it's very easy, I think, to lose passion when you're not seeing really dramatic leaps forward. And I think, first of all, acknowledging that the process can be a little bit mundane makes it easier to push through. But again, I think passion is also very important in overcoming the monotony of what trying to achieve can be. I know that I have never in my life been so singularly focused on anything than I was in the two years after I came home from the hospital because, truly, my life depended on improving my functioning and my independence.

Ken White

So, in an effort to be resilient to overcome unbelievable challenges, you've got your three mindset items. Understand human potential, think your way to success, and realize the journey as mundane. But there are also three action items that we came up with. And action item number one is visualize your desired outcome.

Casey White

Yes. So this, to me, means a few things. So, I was an athlete for my entire life. And on one of the teams that I happened to be on, we had a sports psychologist. And his advice to us the night before every game was to visualize your perfect play. Now, as an athlete, that meant what was I going to contribute? See, the exact moment of my perfect play in my mind, play it out, play what it would feel like, play where I was standing, how I would hit the ball, every aspect about what that scenario would look like. And I realized in trying to recover from my health journey and try to put the pieces of my life back together that I wasn't going to be able to do that if I didn't know what that looked like. And so I truly did one day sit down and very intentionally visualize what I wanted my life to be when I put those pieces back together. And as we alluded to earlier, there were a couple of different things that I saw in that visualization. And one was being able to live on my own because when I came home from the hospital, I was living in your old bedroom, in your house.

Ken White

Right.

Casey White

I wanted to be able to work full time to support myself because while I wasn't aware of a lot of sort of what life would look like to me as a disabled person, I did know that if I had the ability to work, I wanted to take it because I like working. And then I also wanted to be able to drive. Right? I mean, I'd been driving since I was 16. I wanted to be able to do it again. So when I sat down and visualized putting my life together, that's what I saw.

Ken White

Action item number two, seek and accept help, especially from the right people.

Casey White

I think especially from the right people is the key to this one because when you're going through a challenge or when you are openly working toward a goal. People are going to come out of the woodwork to help, and it's very well-meaning. Right. People like to help, but it can not only not push you forward, but in some cases, I think, can push you back to take help from people that aren't in a position to actually be advising or be helping. So we were incredibly lucky that you happened to be at a grocery store at the same time as a man and his daughter were doing their own grocery shopping, and he was in a wheelchair. And this was at a point in my recovery where I was sort of starting to think about, okay, what do I do now? I'm a disabled person, I'm 24, and I have no idea what I do with that information. I didn't know what life could look like, and you just went right up to him, and he was so beyond willing to offer us help, and I was very willing to accept it. And meeting with him and learning about the possibilities of what life could look like as a disabled person was not dramatically; was life-changing.

Ken White

Yeah, that was absolutely amazing. I'll never forget it. Yeah. Action item number three: create and commit to a success dashboard.

Casey White

I think it's very important to both define your goals and track your progress. So something that I, in my professional life, have always heard is that a goal that you can't track is just a wish. And so, again, define your goal. Define it, but also make sure that it's trackable. Because, as we said, success is mundane. And if you're not tracking your progress, there's never going to be sort of a signpost where you can look back and think, wow, look how far I've come. And I know for me, my initial goals were so incredibly dull. One of the things that I had tracked religiously at the beginning was how long I could sit on the edge of the bed, and I had a little notebook. And every day, I would sit on the side of the bed, and my mom would time me because I didn't want to see the time while I was doing it. So my mom would time me, and I would write it in a notebook. And in 30 days, I remember going from 10 seconds to 30 seconds to 45 seconds. And the last day of that month, I sat on the edge of the bed for ten minutes. And that doesn't seem particularly exciting. If a friend picked up the phone and said, hey, Ken, I sat on the side of the bed for ten minutes today. You probably wouldn't think anything of it, but because I knew the starting point was 10 seconds, I was really, really able to celebrate the wins along the way. And I think that's something that's really important as you move toward achieving.

Ken White

So you've got three mindset items, three action items. But there is a foundation, the one thing that must be done in addition to these six items if you are to overcome an incredible setback. What is that one item that is absolutely required?

Casey White

You've got to be ready to fight like hell. And honestly, these lessons that I've shared with you today, and we're sharing with your listeners, I learned these the hard way. I really learned these the hard way. But it doesn't have to be that difficult. And that's why I'm really proud to be able to share this with you and your listeners. And that's why I'm proud of what we do in sharing this with companies, and students, and medical professionals. I've learned a lot from my experience, and employing these strategies really works. I'm living proof.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Casey White, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Casey White, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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