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A Fight to Remember

Molly Godby commits to a lifelong fight against the disease that took her mother.

By Molly Godby

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Beth Welch

When people ask me why I do CrossFit, I can give the standard answers: "It's addictive. I love the way it makes me look and feel. There is an awesome community built into CrossFit." And all of that is true.

Another reason, perhaps the main reason, I CrossFit is to fight the disease that is stealing my mother away from me bit by bit, moment by moment, the disease that has changed my mother from a smart, interesting woman into a confused, often scared "adult child."

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Dealing With Disease

My mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease. When she was in her early 60s, before the disease was diagnosed but problems were becoming apparent, she knew things were changing before my older sister and I knew. She always found ways to compensate or explain these problems away. When she followed my family to Colorado to live, she said it was a new town that caused her to get lost—even after she had driven the same routes many times.

She worked as a counselor and had to fill out forms as part of her job. When she finally had to ask me to help with the forms, things started to click with me that something wasn't right, although deep down I had known that she was struggling. The forms were basic, and I could fill them out even with no knowledge in her field. Then she started to avoid driving unless it was absolutely necessary.

In 2007, my family moved to Indiana and my mom came along. That same year, at 66 years old, she was formally diagnosed with dementia with probable onset of Alzheimer's. She lived in an apartment home close to my family in the Indianapolis area. Luckily, this place was within walking distance of a gift store, grocery store, hardware store and other shops. I told her I did not want her driving to places outside of our small suburban town, so she would walk to these places to do her shopping.

I had lost the mother I had known and, in essence, gained a child.

The fact that she was fairly new in town was a social nightmare for her. She had always been somewhat introverted. She loved a good book better than a crowded room, but without almost anyone her age to interact with, she had to rely on me as her main social outlet. I did my best to take her places when I went, but because she didn't have friends and really didn't have a way to get to places other than with me, slowly, one by one, her skills fell away.

During these early years, my mom understood what was happening to her. Most of the time, she was cooperative when dealing with her disease. But we also called her the "Master of Disguise." She had become so

accustomed to hiding problems and finding other ways to accommodate them that sometimes I had to ask her, "What is going on? What do I need to know? What are you having trouble with?" She would tell me, though sometimes reluctantly, and we would make adjustments accordingly. Bit by bit, I became her driver, her shopper, her adviser, her bookkeeper, her nurse. In almost every important way, I became her parent. I had lost the mother I had known and, in essence, gained a child.

In 2009, my sister and I had to move her into an assisted-living facility. She was actually excited about this move. She understood that it was necessary and hoped she would make some friends and have a social life again. In actuality it has had its ups and down. She was 69 and most of the other residents were in their 80s, which made it more difficult to make friends, but she managed to meet some people, enjoy activities, and most importantly remain safe and get the help she needed on a daily basis.



Molly Godby

The author's mother had a flair for fashion and loved art, theater and gardening.



Beth Welch

CrossFit helps Godby combat feelings of anger and helplessness and keep her body and mind healthy in the fight against memory loss.

Before Alzheimer's, I remember my mother as a beautiful woman who was reserved and liked to read quietly on her own yet always had a flair for fashion. She kept a small garden and usually had fresh herbs available for meals. She loved art, took my sister and me to the theater, and encouraged us to be creative. Mom's life's work was as a teacher and a counselor. She was smart. She worked for a major university's pain-management center, where she counseled patients who suffered from chronic pain. She helped them with relaxation techniques and biofeedback. She volunteered her time to breast-cancer support groups and to groups that empowered women to find careers and to follow their passions.

This strong woman, this smart woman, is gone.

A Parent Lost

It is often hard to remember that the mom I knew growing up is the same woman I see now. The mother of my memories has been replaced with a woman who can no longer read. She cannot use the TV remote. She is afraid to get in the shower because the water is "dirty."

She is not allowed to walk outside without someone with her. She has no idea how to find the dining hall or how to order food. She once loved seeing and emulating the latest fashions but now has no idea what "pants" are and is confused trying to put on clothes. She sometimes looks in the mirror and thinks that her own image is someone else—someone who is a caretaker, visitor or friend but not herself. The mother who took care of me is now a person who cannot take care of herself and doesn't even recognize herself.

There is more. Unable to understand the world around her as it is, her mind creates an alternate world. For instance, she is sure that she has met Andrea Bocelli and other people she sees on TV, and she creates stories around these hallucinations. Some hallucinations are even stranger and much less benign. She tells the story of how she was involved in executing two young boys. Executing two boys? Yes, she says that she had to go to a jail to counsel two teenage boys. While there, the jail staff made her watch as the first boy was executed. She describes how he sat in a chair and someone put something in his mouth and he died. Then she says she was asked to kill the second boy, but she refused.

There are so many times that I leave her ... and all I want to do is go for a long run or throw heavy weight around.

How should I react to stories like this that have become her reality, her truth? I go along. I humor her. I tell her how horrible it is that this happened to her, that I am so sorry that she had to do that. Her response is, "Why would I make that up? That is too horrible to make up." In some small part of mom that is still mom, it is as if she knows her stories are bizarre, and she wonders if she is insane. She tries to justify the stories to me to prove that she is not crazy. She is not insane, of course, just losing her mind—literally. I must watch and listen and try to respond calmly and reassuringly while she spins out stories and desperately tries to explain, in some fashion, a world that she does not, and cannot, understand.

My mom is almost 72 now, and although she is still lucid at times, she more and more exists in this alternate reality. She is losing sight of me as her daughter, although she sees me on a regular basis. It won't be long until she completely doesn't recognize me or my sister or her four grandchildren. And, to be honest, all of this just plain sucks. Many a day I leave after spending time with her and barely make it to my car before I start to bawl. There are so many times that I leave her not just mad but full of fury and sorrow, and all I want to do is go for a long run or throw heavy weight around.

Beneath my anger is pain, immense pain. How can I describe it, the pain of witnessing my mother's personality disintegrate, of seeing the beautiful, gentle, empathetic woman who raised me become someone else, a someone who is often frightened, confused, suspicious, and angry? She knows even at times, you see, that "she," the person she was, is dying a sort of death apart from the rest of her physical being. Imagine knowing such a thing. Imagine knowing that nothing can be done to keep yourself from disappearing day by day by day.

Fighting for the Future

My pain is deep and constant. It springs from my anger that this awful thing has happened to my mother, my helplessness in knowing that I can do nothing to help her and the immense sadness I feel in losing my mother. It is a pain that eats away at me. If I let it, it could overwhelm me and drag me down. Sometimes it is like being in a pool of water and constantly trying to get across only to be pulled down, fighting, gasping for air.

Now take another step with me. Imagine, as I do, that what is happening to my mother may one day happen to me, that someday when I forget a name or lose my keys, it may not be because I am stressed or busy but because I am suffering the first symptoms of the onset of Alzheimer's. I am scared to death that someday the reason for forgetfulness might be because I have my mother's disease.

These fears are not unfounded or irrational. Here are the facts:

- There is an identifiable gene that indicates the likelihood that a person may develop Alzheimer's.
- A person with a parent who has Alzheimer's is somewhat more likely to have the gene.
- If the mother is the parent with the disease, the chances are greater than if the parent is the father.



Beth Welch

There is no cure for Alzheimer's, but a good diet and exercise can significantly lower the risk of dementia and memory loss.

My sister and I may have the gene. I don't know if I have it, and I don't plan to find out. But the constant "what if?" is always there. Added to the sadness, anger, helplessness and pain I feel for my mother is the real fear I have for myself. I fear that someday my children will have to watch me disappear, just as I have watched my mother.

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These fears are based on reality, and I cannot avoid the reality that someday I may have my mother's disease. How do I reconcile that reality with my determination to live a meaningful life with my family, not a life based on fear? During the past few years I have developed a plan, and that plan gives me hope.

My plan is straightforward: I will do everything I can to combat the chances of becoming a victim of Alzheimer's. As yet, there is no cure for Alzheimer's, and the few drugs used in treating Alzheimer's symptoms don't work for everyone. They did not work for my mother. Someday there may be a cure, but right now I have no control over research or drugs or cures. I can control only what I do and how I live.

CrossFit has become part of my plan to stave off Alzheimer's. CrossFit is my hope, my determination.

Extensive medical research indicates that exercise and diet are even better than mental exercise in combating memory loss. Research also shows that diabetes, high cholesterol, high sugar intake and lack of exercise all contribute to memory loss, dementia and Alzheimer's. The research shows that one should adopt a cleaner diet and exercise the body and mind regularly to help stave off memory loss. Doing these things can lower your risks by 40 percent. I will take whatever I can get.



Beth Welch

Every time she considers skipping a WOD, Godby thinks of her mom and starts the clock.

My husband introduced me to CrossFit in 2007, just at the time of my mother's diagnosis. Both the diagnosis and CrossFit have changed my life, albeit on two totally different levels, and both co-exist in my life: one as darkness, one as light. CrossFit and its principles—including exercise, diet and mental acuity—fall right in line with my personal war against Alzheimer's. CrossFit has become part of my plan to stave off Alzheimer's. CrossFit is my hope, my determination.

Equally important, CrossFit is part of my commitment to my present physical health. I usually do CrossFit five to six days a week, and although I started out at an affiliate, I now mostly work out alone. For me, this is a lifetime commitment not just for myself, but also for my family. Each time that voice creeps up in me that says, "Take the day off" or "Forget it. No one is here watching you. You don't have to do that WOD," I think of my mom. Then the sad yet completely pissed-off warrior of a woman inside me takes over and says, "Hell, no. We are doing this."

And I do. Alone in my gym, I fight, fight through the workout while fighting against Alzheimer's. In some respects, I am a lot like every other CrossFitter out there. I felt like a complete beast when I PR'd my overhead squat last week and wanted to tell everyone. I still get that nervous feeling before every WOD because I want to annihilate it. Pressing the button for the clock to start the countdown is sometimes like jumping into a cold pool. I know it's going to hurt, but I've just got to do it. I long to improve my times and I am completely outraged and embarrassed when I don't. I put a lot of pressure on myself to be "the best," whatever that means at the time. I am super competitive. I want to win. I want to beat everyone. And I certainly want to beat Alzheimer's. I must win that battle.

CrossFit has also taught me a great deal about food. We once were the typical American family in thinking we were pretty healthy. Pizza, drive-throughs and our "treat drawer" were not everyday or even every-week routines, but they still didn't help us be a healthy family. Now, thanks to the information on CrossFit.com about Zone and Paleo eating, our family eats very clean meals. We love to experiment and try new foods, although please don't ask my 8-year-old son about kale. It may bring him to tears.

Lifelong CrossFitter

I will continue to be a dedicated lifelong CrossFitter, with all that entails—the WODs, the diet, the continual learning. CrossFit is not just a program; it is a core value in my life. I am now physically and mentally stronger than I have ever been, which I can truly attribute to my dedication to CrossFit. I will never be the person who says, “Remember when I did CrossFit?”

I own this body, and every day I do my very best to keep it as healthy and as strong as it can be. So go ahead and make fun of me if I won't eat that cookie or if I insist on fitting in a workout before we go out Friday night. Because of these life choices, I will continue to be the mom who does flips off the diving board. I will high-five my kids as we run past each other while doing a WOD. I will race them up the stairs to their rooms to read with them before bed. And I will certainly be the mom who remembers who I am and what I stand for ... or I will die trying.

This journey that I am on with my mom continues to be a rough road. On a given day, after what would be considered a “good” visit, I may break down and sob uncontrollably. On other days, I adopt the mantra “it is what it is.” CrossFit has prepared me, and continues to prepare me, both physically and mentally for the unknown and unknowable, which is every minute I am with my mom. I never know who she is going to be. What I do know is that I love her unconditionally and will continue to help take care of her. I will love her for who she is every minute, every second that I still have her, Alzheimer's and all.

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Courtesy of Molly Godby

About the Author

Molly Godby lives with her family of four in Zionsville, Ind. She holds a CrossFit Level 1 certificate and has attended the Movement and Mobility Trainer seminar. In her former life, she played high-school and college basketball. She received a B.A. in psychology from Randolph-Macon Woman's College. She was also a fourth-grade teacher and coached two competitive basketball teams while living in Colorado. She now enjoys taking care of her two children and is the household CEO, who stays fit doing CrossFit on her own.