

THE BLOODLINE WITH LLS

A PODCAST FOR PATIENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Episode: 'Training for the Unknown: Jason's Story'

Description:

Listen in as Alicia Patten-Madera speaks with Jason Khalipa. Jason is a devoted father, world champion, and global businessman. Jason is a force of nature in the fitness world whose life was turned upside down when his daughter, Ava, was diagnosed with leukemia in 2016 at the age of 4. Jason and his wife, Ashley, dedicated themselves to the fight armed with a positive mindset and an emphasis on physical and mental strength. Join Jason and Alicia as he shares more about how Ava was diagnosed, what their cancer journey taught him not only as a person, but as a father, and how his passion for fitness helped him remain strong and discipline for him and his family along this new journey.

Transcript:

Alicia: Welcome to The Bloodline with LLS. I am Alicia. Thank you so much for joining us on this episode. Today, we will be speaking with Jason Khalipa. Jason is a devoted father, world champion, and global businessman. Jason is a force of nature in the fitness world; however, his world was shaken to the core when his daughter, Ava, was diagnosed with leukemia in 2016 at the age of 4. Jason and his wife, Ashley, dedicated themselves to the fight armed with relentless positivity and zeal. Thank you so much for joining us, Jason.

Jason: Yeah; no. Thank you. It's good to—it's good to be on the show. I really appreciate you, you know, taking the time to jump on and let us share a little bit of our perspective about Ava's journey and what we learned.

Alicia: Absolutely; absolutely. Now, firstly, I just want to let you know that you do so much. I was on your website earlier this week, jasonkhalipa.com, and it's so impressive to see everything that you've created and are involved in. Before we jump into those things, though, I just want to start with life leading up to Ava's diagnosis and around that time because I was speaking with a young adult who had just left for a solo European trip. Imagine that! And after 3 days in, she got the news of her diagnosis; and another young adult who had just moved to Pittsburgh, had a new apartment, a new job, a new relationship, knew nobody in the town, or that city, and received her diagnosis shortly after. What was it like for you? What was going on at that time for you and your family?

Jason: Yeah; so, Ava was diagnosed in January of 2016 and, at that time, you know, life was rocking and rolling aside from her medical concerns that we had, which I can share with you. Leading up to that, I mean, I had been competing in the CrossFit games for years, had had quite a bit of success there. We had built a, you know, multi-national business. Ah, we had 2 children. You know, things were—things were going well and then, you know, our daughter started having leg pain and we thought it was just like growing pains. We didn't really think—we thought something of it, of course, like I consulted with our, you know, doctors and physical therapists and we thought it was just growing pains. And then, you know, she was getting really tired in school and we were like "huh" and so we thought maybe she had like an iron deficiency or something like that going on. Then, at the same time, she started having these bad ear infections. Ah, you know, I remember the doctor specifically saying to me that this was the worse ear infection that he had ever seen. I was like "man, that's kind of odd, you know being the worst you've ever seen. It sounds like there's something big going on."

Alicia: Wow.

Jason: And then, finally, yeah; the big factor that really kind of rocked our world was that she started getting bruising. So, finally, and we had been taking her into the doctor's, but when you look at these things as individual cases, there wasn't any alarm to be, you know, there was always kind of something that it might be. And then, finally, he's like, "hey, man, we need to get blood work done" and when the blood work was taken, it was the middle of the day, I'll never forget we were back home. My wife had made dinner and our pediatrician had called me and said, "hey, there's something irregular in the blood work. I'll call you back in 5 minutes." Right, that was the thing. So then, he goes, "yeah, I talked to, the additional doctors and we need you to go to the Stanford Emergency Room right now." And, you know, we didn't even pack up anything. We just left dinner on the table and we left. I mean, it was that quick and, ah, even speaking about it gives me goosebumps because that night, you know, we learned a lot and then 2 ½ years later, we made it through and here we are about 8 months post-chemo and Ava's rocking and rolling.

Alicia: And for those listening, Ava's diagnosis is acute lymphoblastic leukemia, known as ALL. It's one of the most common forms of leukemia found in children. So, you said that you, kind of, just had to get up and get started because, of course, this is something so unexpected, where did you find or was there information at the time? Was there education at the time? Where did you go for that type of support?

Jason: Well, I mean, I think for me, and I talk about this a lot, and for anybody listening who's struggling with a family member who's sick or, perhaps, they're sick, their looking to get through things. I think that exercise, and competing, and getting comfortable with uncomfortable has done wonders for my wife, myself, and my family. Ah, for a lot of years, I was competing in the CrossFit games and I thought I was

competing to test myself. I thought I was competing maybe for, you know, money, or whatever it was, but it wasn't the money and it wasn't the fame. It was developing a set of tools that when life throws you a curve ball and you have to overcome adversity in sports, you learn to overcome it by positive self-talk, understand what is in your control. And I developed a set of skills by having a sports therapist that worked with me; and my wife and I developed these skills over the years because we had to if I wanted to compete at the highest level, but it just so happened that when Ava got sick, which was the biggest curve ball we had gotten, those skills transferred over so, so, so well, and my recommendation for anybody is that if you are not exercising in some way, shape or form, don't be motivated by the health benefits. If by now, you're not motivated by that, you're probably not going to be motivated by that or how you feel or how you look. You know, you could be motivated by if life ever throws you a curve ball, through exercise, you learn how to overcome these things in an atmosphere that is not life or death. So, when things get challenging, you're more set up to overcome them.

I mean, I'll give you a perfect example. The night that Ava was diagnosed, it hit us. It rocked our world 'cause we, you know, weren't that educated on what leukemia was. I mean, obviously, we just knew it was bad. And my wife, you know, takes me out in the hallway and she's just like, "hey, listen, you go tell our family the news, but you make sure you tell them that there will not be a tear shed in front of our daughter. If they want to cry, they can cry outside. When they walk inside, there can be nothing but positivity and we are going to get through this. We're going to crush it. And she turned around and went right back into the room. It was like a football coach giving the biggest pump-up of a lifetime and it wasn't that Ashley—it was just ingrained in her from seeing me pass out on events or perhaps having to overcome success and failures on the floor in the arena with thousands of people watching. It then carried over. So, again, that's my motivation for everybody. Looking back on it now, it was all those times of overcoming it that helped us overcome this biggest challenge and I am still taking it into my life every single day now. I'm more motivated now than ever, actually.

Alicia: Right; and you made a great point. I was watching a few of your clips on your Instagram, and on your website, and you talk about mental strength, often you said that during this time, I mean, when you exercise and you do it for actually gaining more mental capacity to handle different things in life, it translates over to other areas of your life. So, how much did mental strength play a role in your daughter's cancer journey as a parent?

Jason: Oh, I mean, I mean hugely. I mean, look, in the order of importance, obviously, you know, doctors, hospitals, medicine. I mean, look, I mean—it goes without saying that Stanford and Lucille Packard are—are top-notch, and I will be forever grateful, but you know, it was through the relationships with my family that we had developed. It was through, you know, overcoming these things that we were able

to come together as a strong unit and fight as one and not allow this negativity or allow this situation to take over us, right? We allowed it to make us stronger and I think it is because by the time we had gotten to this huge trial, we had had minor little trials to overcome. And so, even today, like I just got done running, and I ran pretty far, and I set myself a goal and I did it. And tomorrow morning, I'm going to the ocean and I'm going to go do a cold plunge, not because I want to, but because I know that by me going in there and putting myself in this uncomfortable position, it will help me to build up the mindset, get stronger to learn how to overcome just this little bit of adversity where, if life throws me a curve ball throughout the day, hope that I could better accomplish that. And I think, when looking at Ava's diagnosis, our family was—was a strong unit together and I think some of that came through all of our fitness. Now, obviously, other than that, it's just a lot of love, a lot of care and a lot of really amazing people, of course, but this was something that was in our control that we could do now, today.

Alicia: And in a video on your website, your wife, Ashley, says that when Ava got diagnosed, you had an emotion that she had never seen, that she believes Ava saw and wanted to be more connected to you. Can you tell me more about that transformation?

Jason: Well, I mean, just up until that point, you know, I mean, my relationship was good, but once she got diagnosed, I mean, I was in the hospital every single day, every night, didn't miss a thing. There was nothing else to focus on. And I do think that something I would share with people is, for years, I incorporated this idea of AMRAP mentality and what that meant was when I'm doing something, I'm doing it—I'm working for 'as many reps as possible'. It really comes from fitness, but it carries over to everything else we're doing where you are present, you're focused on whatever you're doing, and you switch gears throughout your day. And when she got sick, there was nothing else on my plate. I mean, I remember I was talking to my Dad. I was like, "hey, Dad, you know"—it was like the first day and he's just like, "hey, look, we're going to take Caden—he's our son—and you have one focus and your focus is to get Ava better. That's it." And so, from that day forward, it was just a hundred percent attention on her and that was really—that was great for our relationship because she got to see—I mean, I was all in and I think that was—that was special for our relationship then, and it's special for our relationship today.

Alicia: Absolutely. Speaking of AMRAP because, I'm going to be honest, to me, CrossFit can be very intimidating. I feel like it's a whole...

Jason: Yeah.

Alicia: ... new world, there's new lingo, for example, instead of gym. Don't you guys use the word "Box"?

Jason: It can be intimidating at times.

Alicia: Hmm; hmm, so how does being CrossFit to someone who has never tried it but may be intimidated by it?

Jason: I think that they need to just remove anything, and just walk in the door, and find a coach. Whether you call it CrossFit or you call it Functional Fitness; you call it High Intensity Training, call it whatever you want, you know, we just want to get people moving. We want them squatting, pressing and pulling. We want them doing, you know, relatively high intensity based on their ability for, you know, 15 to 20 minutes at a hard effort; and you're going to see results you never thought possible. And no better example of that, you know, when I was in the hospital, we spent probably 3 months there, total, you know, off and on. Our longest stint, I want to say, was 3 ½ weeks, which is a pretty long time to be in the hospital; and we parked the truck in the parking garage and I just got after it. I put all the gear in the back of the truck and I lifted weights, I threw down and it's because that was a part of my routine. That made me a better person. It made me a better father and husband. When I came into the room, I brought energy. I was fired up and I think for anybody that's intimidated by the word CrossFit, just remove the word CrossFit from anything and just look for a coach. You want to Google CrossFit; go ahead and find a CrossFit gym. If you want to find a functional training center, just find that, but you need to find a coach, and just walk in the door, and meet people. And if it's not the right vibe and not the right, you know, flow, then go on to the next one because you are eventually going to find someone who truly, truly cares about guiding you on your fitness journey and all it takes is just that one step to walk in the gym.

Alicia: So, beyond CrossFit, when you and your wife, Ashley, looked for, again, education and looked for support, were there other families that you connected to? Were there other groups like a support group? Where did you find the education to learn more about Ava's diagnosis outside of what the doctors may have been telling you?

Jason: Yeah, I mean, I, ah you know, I read that night—you know, I read as much as I could of The Emperor of All Maladies which is a pretty popular cancer book...

Alicia: Yeah.

Jason: ... and a couple of others and, I mean, because I was in the hospital for so long, I just tried to educate myself. I wanted to really learn as much as I could. Ashley was connected to a network of Moms. I had talked to a few people who had gone through it and that was helpful, right? She found—I think especially for my wife—a network of Moms who could talk about, you know, the next phase we had to go through, where there's intra-maintenance, or maintenance, or, you know, DI, delayed intensification. Each one of them comes with their own hurdles and I think

having her talk to these Moms, who had gone through it ahead of time, was helpful because you can kind of set yourself up and, frankly, for that matter, it actually works the opposite. So, sometimes the doctors over-emphasize things. So, for example, they took us into the room, like 3 days after her diagnosis, and said, "hey, she's going to have to wear a mask for the next 2 years. She's not going to be able to go to school for 2 years. She's not going to grow her hair back for 2 years." And, did she have to wear a mask; did she not go to school; did she—of course, but it wasn't for as long as they said; and I think they just kind of elevated it. Maybe worse-case scenario-type thing whereas if you talk to families that went through it, it might be a little more realistic. Now, we all take this with a grain of salt, right? Every situation's different.

Alicia: Right; and at LLS, we definitely stress the importance of community because we have a few resources like online chats and we have LLS Community which is, basically, an online social platform and we believe that there is power in community and that when something like this happens, where it's completely out of the blue and you have no idea even how to approach it, even when you're told and you're going—like you said, you kind of have to get up and go and sometimes you don't have the chance to gather all your resources So, I think it is so important to stress the importance of community, like what your wife did, join that group of Moms.

Jason: Yeah; for sure, for sure. I mean, I think--I think, you know, we were really blessed. We were blessed to have worked for a long time to build up a hedge financially, you know, obviously, through sports physically and emotionally and our family was right there by our side. And, you know, I am grateful every day that we had all that support we have and now my wife and I are dedicated to fund-raising and supporting other families. Just next week, she's hosting her 3rd Annual Ava's Kitchen event and, you know, she fund-raises heavily for, you know, families and children going through pediatric cancer. And I think that's our—that's one of our destinies now, right, because we saw a side that was so heavy and we are so grateful that we had all these things that lined up well for us, but not everybody has those resources; and so we want to try and do the best we can.

Alicia: Right; and speaking of Ava's Kitchen—just reading about it online, how important is nutrition when it comes to any wellness endeavor?

Jason: I think that, you know, eating healthy foods—I think most people would agree that, you know, leafy greens and meat, fruit, you know, nuts, seeds, and things of that nature are going to be beneficial for your health. I think that, for us, we find that blend between eating really well for ourselves and also letting our kids be kids, but I also think that there's a lot of poor food choices available to children these days and I think that we need to be aware of, you know—regardless of the cancer or the leukemia, it more so just about energy levels and these insulin spikes. You know, if your children are just having these candies and sugars throughout the duration of the

day, you know, it is not—that's not necessarily going to be extremely beneficial long term. So, we're—we're aware of that and we try to bridge the gap between eating healthy as a family, of course. But also, at the same time, not, you know, if we're going to a kids' party and they want to have some cake, I mean, that's perfectly fine.

Alicia: Right. And like you said, after Ava's diagnosis, both you and your wife, Ashley, became more involved within the space of pediatric cancer bringing more awareness to it and supporting other families going through it. Did you feel like maybe there was not enough support for you guys during that time of your diagnosis and, if so, what was missing that you feel like should have been there at a time where you thought you would have needed it the most?

Jason: Well, I mean, look, obviously it's my perspective, but I think that every oncology department, every hospital should have a gym in it. I mean, I just feel that way. I think that the gym just releases a lot of really positive things in your body and it brings a lot of energy back in the room. And, you know, I think we think about the children all the time, which is obviously, you know, priority #1, we also want to make sure the parents are doing well because they, ultimately, want to make sure their relationship stays strong between the 2 parents and, you know, we want to make sure they stay healthy. I think by having a gym there, it's is a low-hanging fruit that we can try and work on which is something I'm passionate about which, hopefully, in the future, I would be able to implement more.

But, you know, as far as I'm concerned, it wasn't so much what there wasn't available, it's what we have available. I think we have a—I don't want to use the word "destiny", but we need to support other people because of all the things we've been blessed with. We have a large network that wants to make an impact and we need to make an impact; and we can, you know. Ashley's event last year raised \$400K grand in one night and that can put a lot of smiles on a lot of kids' faces. And, you know, people want to be a part of it, and we need to continue it and do it for the right reasons which is, you know, to provide these families; even these small, little trips for a baseball game, or a lunch, or dinner and that little bit might just get them through the next month or two of hardship.

Alicia: Absolutely. And you know what I find really interesting about your story is that, we've spoken to so many families, and patients and caregivers, and HCP's (health care professionals), and you know, when sometimes this comes up, fitness is probably nowhere on the radar. They're probably thinking now we have to zero in on how to fight this thing and we'll be in the hospital room, or we'll to get support from our families, but you don't think of fitness because you might just be thinking about the physical aspect of it as opposed to, like you said, the mental aspect of it. That allows someone to push that much harder through this, right?

Jason: Yeah; yeah. I'm in full agreement with you. I mean, from the day of diagnosis, obviously like the first day or two, was busy, but after that, every single day, right? I mean, I knew when the doctors were making the rounds and I made it my business to get outside and get out to work-out and I would come back in. And, you know, my priority was obviously in some hospital, but another priority of mine is to recharge, refuel and to bring that energy back into the room of positivity and there's no better way, in my opinion, than getting out there and working out. And, you know, we don't need to be put on a pedestal. If someone's listening right now and has family members going through something challenging or they're going through something challenging, you don't need to make it like this all or nothing. Just go for a 5-minute walk. Go for a 10-minute walk. Walk down the hallway 7 times, right? And at least, you're winning, you know. Then, tomorrow, try to do a little bit better. And stay consistent with it, but you know, better is better is the way I look at it.

Alicia: Absolutely. There was this one person I was speaking with. She's a young adult and she was saying that when she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, she was so sick from her diagnosis. And she loves fitness, she loves going to the gym, she loves working out and it would hurt her so much that she couldn't do that. So she just started encouraging other people to do it, and she had a hashtag that got started and people would use that hashtag to remind her and, motivate her and strengthen her, letting her know that she can't get out of bed today; but they are. And, you know, I thought that was so powerful for people to see because it provides hope and strength for the person going through it and it also lets the people around who may not be going through a diagnosis also understand that this is a blessing and we should be using all we can to impact others and motivate others. So, I think that is so huge.

Jason: Yeah; absolutely, 100%. And it's—you just have to get started with it and if it's just not a part of your lifestyle right now, that's fine, you could easily make it a part of your lifestyle. And, you know, people say there's no time for it. There's always time for it. You just have to make—prioritize it and make time for it.

Alicia: Right. Now, I want to jump into this. I call it—I mean, I don't know if you call it this, but I call it this. This is the 6—the 6-month lease story is how I kind of phrase it. And I heard the story where you signed a 6-month lease and you said that in 6 months, you would either outgrow it or you would go bankrupt. And, fortunately, you were able to outgrow the space. What was that like? What caused you to make such a bold move when it came to following your passion?

Jason: Well, I mean, when I was graduating from college, I had a few opportunities on the table as far as regular, traditional jobs, but at the time, I had been working at a fitness space at a traditional gym since I was in high school. So, I had a lot of experience and, you know, I just told myself one day I'm going to get after it. I'm going to start my own business and I want to be, you know, in charge of my destiny. The more hard work I put in, the more benefit I should receive and I wanted to see it

that way. And, the only opportunity I could find was this 6-month lease 'cause the guy took a big chance on me. I happened to go to the same school that he had graduated from. I had no money, no credit, nothing and he said, "alright, I'll give you 6 months." I said, "alright". And, yup, from Day 1, as soon as you sign the ink on that—I'll never forget. I signed a lease for 6-months at like \$1500 bucks a month on the hood of this white Dodge truck or maybe it was a Ford truck. And I remember he took his copy; I took my copy. I was like, "oh boy." And as soon as that thing, you know, the ink hadn't even dried and I was—I was already nervous and you just got to go. There's no other opportunity—there's really no other option. And it's like the same thing as someone getting sick in your family. When you get information like that, you've got to go. You've got to make it happen. And there's really 2 ways you can react to it. You can look at it with a pair of sunglasses or with the, you know, bright glasses on. Either you could fall towards the negative or you could fall towards the positive, but in general, when you fall towards the negative, negative things come out of it, but if you could find some type of positive somewhere in something, it's a nice way to kind of move forward. And I think when I signed that lease, it was, "alright, this guy—this guy finally gave me a chance. Even though it's only 6 months, I've got a go." And, we did.

Alicia: Right. And I feel like having that pressure—I mean, it can be seen as something like, "oh my gosh, this is real life now" or it's something that just, you know, motivates you even more because you know that time is limited.

Jason: Yeah

Alicia: And speaking of moving ahead, on your Instagram, there was a clip with yourself and a gentleman named, Patrick Vellner and there was a quote that said, "I don't win and I don't lose, I just plow ahead." Now for our listeners who are mostly patients and caregivers who are listening and thinking OK, but how do you do this? I know it's one step in front of the other, but how is it that Jason and his wife Ashley were able to take something so life changing and many would argue that it is life changing for the negative and move forward with such positivity and really stick to that. Where did you get that strength from?

Alicia: Oh.

Jason: People ask me all the time, "where do you get it, the internal drive". It's like, I don't really know where it comes from, but you need to identify something that makes you feel strong enough to get up and do something about it and identify why you are doing something, what's your internal "why" and then, you know, keep reminding yourself of what that "why" is. And if your child is sick, the "why" for you to be fit is to be the best version of yourself for them, right? So, when they do get better, you're never going to allow fitness to inhibit your ability to go out and do anything with them. If you want to go climb a mountain, hell yeah! Let's rock it, right? And, that's an example of just understanding your deeper "why". You know,

why do I want to go to work? Well, if life ever throws me a curveball, I want to be best prepared to handle financially, as an example, right? I think understanding your “why” helps you to have this mental toughness and, outside of that, you know, just starting one foot in front of the other I think is key. You know, as an example, if you really hate cold water, right? Just start off with a week just putting your feet into some cold water, right? And then, from there, maybe start taking cold showers and, then from there, maybe step it up. And what you’ll find is that you’ll start—a gentleman, David Goggins, called it “callusing your mind”. You start creating calluses in your mind, like you do your hands, that then allow you to do more and more, and more; and before you know it, you’re trucking through anything you want to get after.

Alicia: Right. It’s funny that you use that example. I was talking to a friend once and he was talking about trusting the process of just getting through different things in life and of course, my answer was “oh yeah, but sometimes it can be so hard” and he goes, “you know what? It’s not really hard. It’s just really uncomfortable.” And he kind of uses this as an example. He was like if someone said, “go take a cold shower.” I mean, it is not hard to do that. It’s just going to make you very uncomfortable. when you kind of look at things in different lenses or just different ways, you realize that you can do so much because it all stems from how you think about something.

Jason: Yeah; it’s all in the mindset, right? I mean, we’ve had some really, really, really challenging times, as many people listening to this do, but it just depends how you want to reframe in your mind and I think you can develop some of those skills from a number of different ways. From positive self-talk, right, when you feel a negative thought come in, trying to revert it to a positive one, to understanding what’s inside your control versus outside your control. Really important is if you just take 2 circles, in regards to your child’s diagnosis, all the things that are in your control, put on the left; put all the things that are out of your control, put on the right and focus on the things that are in your control. And it helps to really make you feel more comfortable and not as stressed because your focus is on things that you can actually drive and impact on which I think is really important.

Jason: I think—I think anybody listening, you know, there’s no—everybody has their—their times where things get tough, right? I mean, I can remember countless times—maybe not countless, but a few times, right, where, you know, I broke down and it was really tough. I remember this one time I was getting coffee. It was, like, 3 days after Ava’s diagnosis and, ah, I ordered like a cappuccino from like this coffee guy...

Alicia: Hmm; hmm.

Jason: ...and all of a sudden, I just broke down crying. I just remember some dude behind me standing in line, because we were in the hospital, he was just like, “hey, bro”. Like, he said to me, like, “hey, man. All will be well” and I was just like—and I

just said to myself, and I was like, “yeah, you’re right. It is all going to be well.” And maybe that was just what I needed at that moment, right?

Then, another time when Ava, for example, got put in the ICU, I was super, super heavy, right? And that was a moment where you are not trying to be over-positive or rah-rah, it’s a moment where you’re trying to evaluate, and evaluate in a positive way. So, it’s not always charging ahead positive, positive, positive. There’s also time for deep reflection saying, “hey, this is a serious situation with life and death on the line. You know, what can I do to improve this?” And, you know, I think when you reframe it in your head, it’s like what is in your control versus out of your control helps you to move forward and educating yourself. And, at the same time, obviously always thinking on the more positive side, I think is very important because your brain could go down a very negative path very quickly.

Alicia: That’s so true and I think it is so important to kind of hear both sides since, a lot of times, people might say, “I can’t relate because I’m just not there emotionally or mentally”, but then when you hear that those people who, are experiencing both emotions, but they’re just really trying to focus, on the one that’s going to actually help them get through it. I think it’s important for other people to hear that so that they also be encouraged.

Jason: Yeah; like I’ll give you a really quick example. We’re in the ICU and the doctors didn’t talk as well as they should have between oncology and the ICU and she missed a steroid, ah, ah, like time where she needed her steroid. And, in the grand scheme of things it wasn’t a big deal, right? Like in the grand scheme of things, it’s a steroid, versus all the other stuff that we had going on, but, you know, I was keeping track of all her medications. I was keeping track of everything and I just said to the nurse on hand—I was like “hey, I’m just letting you know, I think she should have gotten her steroid” and, sure enough, you know, she’s like, “oh yeah; you’re right. You know, it’s a miscommunication.” No big deal, right? In the grand scheme of things, no big deal, but it was something I was focused on. I was focused on, hey, what medications does she have coming up? What can I do to improve her comfort level? What kind of food can I go get her instead of letting my brain go down this very negative path? And that’s just an example.

Alicia: Right; and that’s a great example. That’s so true because it’s kind of what you choose to focus on, right?

Jason: Yeah; absolutely. And—and, you know, back to competing and fitness, I mean, not to beat a dead horse, but I mean, you know, that’s what I have to focus on when I’m competing. You’re in the middle of a really hard event and if you allow your thoughts to go to the negative, you’re never going to perform the way you want to until you—you need to train your brain to think towards the positive so, this way, when

life really kicks you down, then you're automatically thinking that way because it's second nature to you.

Alicia: Right. Now, we spoke about it being you and your wife, Ashley, and, your daughter, Ava. For you, as a father, how has this molded you and shifted how you were before diagnosis to after, as a father who may be listening to this?

Jason: I think I'm more compassionate. I think I'm definitely more emotional than I used to be. I hold family and close friends to a very, you know, high regard. My relationship with my family has gotten significantly closer and I think it could have gone one of 2 ways, right? It could have gone the other way. I could have seen how they reacted to it and not been as supportive, but they stepped up to the plate bigger than anybody and I'll never forget that. And so, for me as a father, it just made me listen more, ah, change my perspective, it allowed me to be more grateful for what we have at this point. When Ava's was early on diagnosed, we used to travel all the time and we couldn't travel outside of the country for a while because she was getting diagnoses for a couple of years, right, and I remember just saying to her, "hey, baby, when you get through this, we are going to take you anywhere in the world for as long as you want, right?" And, sure enough, when she finished treatment, we went a lot of places, for like 6 weeks we were gone and the whole time through her treatment, I was just saying, "hey, let's get excited for our world trip. Where are we going? Where are we going?" And, when we were on that trip, I just remember saying to myself, like "when is it going to get better?" Like, the gratitude I had that day, and I still have today, because of those hard times we went through, it just totally changed the way I look at everything. It just makes me a lot more grateful today.

Alicia: Right, because you always hear about new normal. A lot of patients and caregivers talk about "well, this is our new normal." So, it is always interesting hearing kind of how this diagnosis has changed you because, like you said, they can go one of 2 ways. It can make you into a person that is super, just why did this happen to me? or it can turn you into someone who looks forward to the end of it. The end of when we get through this, where are we going next? Where is our next big trip? So, it is always interesting to hear what the person transforms into, as a result of this experience.

Jason: Yeah; I mean, the question of why us never, never, ever, ever was spoken once—never!

Alicia: Yeah.

Jason: It never even crossed our minds, right? Like, it wasn't about why us? It's about, okay, let's rock and roll, right? Like, we—like, it's outside of our control, let's do this, you know, and now how can we impact more people's lives by this and because I think when you start thinking about why us and you start kind of feeling sorry for

yourself, that's when you can really start having detrimental effects between you and your spouse and kids pick up on that, right? I mean, that's one of the reasons why it was so important that, you know, people were never crying in front of you because, at the time, when you're a kid, you don't understand the gravity. And, people around you create the gravity of the situation. And when you have people all around you being so somber, I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing because that might feed on to you. I don't know. And, again, our situation—I just want to be really clear—when you have a child who is diagnosed with ALL, where the cure rate is relatively high, maybe I would be having a totally different conversation if it was a different diagnosis. And so, I just want to be clear...

Alicia: Right.

Jason: ... about that. Like, I might be saying, "hey, look we attacked it. We came out with a positive mindset", but at the same time, had the diagnosis been, "hey, 5% success rate", I don't know how we would have responded. I would like to think we would have responded well, but I can't guarantee that.

Alicia: Right; and that's, you know, that's a really real thing to say because, my grandmother, she had kidney cancer and going back to the question of, you know, why me? She was one of those people who also never said that because she was saying—she always used to say, "what can I do with that question? I can do nothing with that question. What I can do, you know, what I can, you know, work with is what can I learn more about? What are my other options?" if anybody ever came and, you know, showed sympathy, of course, she accepted it, but she would always say, "but you know what, my job is not to figure out why. My job is how to figure out how to live and that's what I'm really going to do right now."

Jason: Yeah; 100%.

Alicia: You and your wife, you, like you said, you wanted to reach out to help other families fighting similar battles. And you and NCFIT teamed up with the Jessie Rees Foundation and Michael Mina to create and host a handful of benefit events. can you tell me more about that relationship and how that was created and formed?

Jason: My family lives in the Bay area. We own a gym business called NCFIT. We have locations here. We also do corporate wellness worldwide and so; we start off by doing blood drives from the Bay area. We hosted some major ones and we still do every year because of how many members we have, but then we kind of fast-forwarded that. So, I just wrote a book. I finished it. It came out on January 8. It's called, As Many Reps as Possible and, a lot of the proceeds from that, we donate to an organization called NEGU, which is the Never Ever Give Up organization and my wife also hosts an event called Ava's Kitchen with the help of a chef, named Michael Mina, who has a restaurant at a place called the Levi's Stadium, the 49'ers stadium, and we

get a bunch of really cool live auction items and the people there are just really passionate to make an impact. And, you know, we donate the money to this organization and we give what's called, like, breakaway adventures, like \$1,000 to families to go to Disneyland, or to do something, or for Christmastime, we'll go and drop off, you know, \$1,000 checks to different families while they are in the hospital. And just really giving like this gift of putting a smile on kids' faces is the goal and they're more concerned about the care and less about the cure. I think the cure is very important as well, but this organization is about the care.

Alicia: You also shed light on blood drives. I know from my great aunt, she was diagnosed with myeloma, which is also a blood cancer and, I mean, blood transfusions saved her life on so many different occasions. So, when someone asks the question or may have asked you as a question, what can we do to help? How can we help you guys, get through this? Is that how you started shedding light on blood transfusions because that is something that people can actually do and also can help save a life?

Jason: Yeah; I mean, I think if you are not doing anything with blood that's a low-hanging fruit that you can do, right? I didn't know that my blood type was rare until I started donating and, so now, that's really good to know and I need to—I want to contribute, right? And I think that it doesn't take any money, but it just takes a little bit of your time and I think that is really cool. So, if you want to start doing that, there's plenty of places everywhere in the world to donate blood and you never know where--when you might need it so you might want you to start donating it. Our gym, you know—we do—we do it every year and we have, you know, because we have these big gyms so you get hundreds and hundreds of people to show up and donate and, you know, people want to donate. They just want it all to be convenient. And we get behind it. It's a really cool community event and, like I said, I mean, it doesn't matter how rich you are. If you need a blood product and no one else donated it, it doesn't matter, right? You need to have somebody donate it. Just like I'd highly recommend that if you are not cotton swabbing for "Be the Match", you should, you know. that's just easy stuff that you could do to really make a big impact on somebody.

Alicia: What advice do you have for parents listening who may be going through a similar experience?

Jason: Well, I mean, I just think if you are a parent out there with a child that's going through some type of, you know, challenge, you know, research, understand it as much as you can; and then also just be informed and be there for the medicine and things of that nature. And, I would also just recommend if you're crushing it right now, which I hope you are, I really do, then, you know, make sure you take the time to develop as much as possible your relationships, your work, all these different things that if life throws you a curve ball, you're best prepared to take it. And, I think, one step in that direction is going for a walk tomorrow. So, motivation is—utilized fitness is



a catalyst towards getting a little bit uncomfortable and overcoming that adversity and see the benefit it provides to everything else. And, you know, we have an NCFIT app if you guys want to check it out. Obviously, we have the book and, we have the gyms here in the Bay area if anyone is interested in stopping by.

Alicia: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Jason, for speaking with me today and for all the great work that you are doing for those around you and those who may be going through a similar situation. Thanks so much.

Jason: Yeah, no. It's just the beginning so—yeah guys, if you want to—Instagram is probably the best spot. Jason Khalipa if you want to keep up what we have going on. Also, Ava's Kitchen is an Instagram handle as well and, yeah, love to just keep moving forward.