“Survivor” Ethan Zohn Opens Up About Wellness for Cancer Survivors

Ethan Zohn, who had Hodgkin lymphoma in 2009 and 2011, supports cancer survivor wellness with the National Comprehensive Cancer Network.

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Ethan Zohn is hard to kill, both on reality TV and in real life. In 2002, he won Survivor: Africa, the third season of the hit CBS show Survivor. In 2009 and again in 2011, he battled and beat Hodgkin lymphoma, a cancer that begins in the white blood cells of the lymphatic system.

Suffice it to say that the 47-year-old former pro soccer player is no pushover. In a recent interview with the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, he opened up about his cancer diagnosis and cancer treatment experiences in an effort to encourage others in recovery to prioritize their well-being.

“Getting a cancer diagnosis is scary. Surviving cancer can be even more scary,” Zohn said. “There are loads of uncertainty and invisible scars that need healing. That’s why I work tremendously hard to maintain my mental, physical and spiritual health in survivorship. Surrounding myself with family and friends, exercising and getting out in nature has helped create balance in my life.”

Zohn was 27 and had most recently worked as a soccer goalkeeper in 2002 when he competed in Survivor: Africa. Filmed in Kenya’s Shaba National Reserve, the show followed two “tribes,” each composed of eight men and women, as they completed a series of challenges, including pushing a heavy cart, rolling a boulder along a path and climbing a rope wall to retrieve food items. In the season finale, Zohn was declared the winner, achieving his dream of drumming up publicity for his athletic career and earning enough money to start the HIV/AIDS charity Grassroot Soccer. (For more on Ethan Zohn’s work on raising HIV awareness, click here.)

Seven years and another Survivor appearance later, he faced an even higher-stakes challenge: cancer. The disease announced itself with a severe, persistent itching that Zohn first noticed while training for the 2009 New York City Marathon. Concerned, he went to a doctor and learned that the itching was an early symptom of CD20-positive Hodgkin lymphoma, which has a relatively high survival rate.

Despite the good odds, Zohn, whose father died of colorectal cancer when Zohn was 14, was deeply shaken by the diagnosis and immediately started cancer treatment. He went into remission

shortly thereafter, but, he told Men's Health, "The fear and the loneliness—and the fear of the cancer returning after I was in remission—was totally paralyzing."

Sure enough, the lymphoma recurred. Less than two years after Zohn's first diagnosis, a PET scan found 70 cancerous nodes in his chest; he underwent chemotherapy, radiation and stem cell transplantation all over again.

Once out of the woods, he turned to cannabidiol, or CBD, a chemical found in marijuana, for help relieving anxiety, depression and loneliness—the natural side effects of weathering a life-threatening medical crisis.

"It calmed my mind and restructured my thought patterns and got me out of this vicious cycle of destructive thoughts. I was able to sleep better, I was able to interact with my friends and family in a better way, I wasn't as anxious and jittery," Zohn said of his experience using CBD.

Zohn has since married the interior designer Lisa Heywood and exchanged the chaos of New York City for the comparative calm of New Hampshire. But although his family has expanded and his physical environment has changed, he told The Boston Globe that he has retained his passion for pushing his body and mind to the limit.

"When I was in the hospital, I was also watching Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains. I was watching it and saying, 'One, I want to survive this thing, and two, if I do, my goal is to get healthy enough—mentally, physically, and spiritually—to go play Survivor again,'" he said.

In February 2020, Zohn made that dream a reality when he faced off against 19 other previous victors in the show's 40th season, Survivor: Winners at War.

For a list of organizations committed to making the transition from treatment to survivorship smooth, read "Survivor Resources." To read another inspiring story of survival and recovery, see "A Hodgkin Lymphoma Diary: Erica Campbell."

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