

Emily: I clearly remember the summer after graduating from high school. I can remember driving around with my best friend Nikola listening to Aqua, that Barbie girl song still will always make me think of that summer and probably a lot of Oasis and my friend Mike who was super into Oasis. But the other big thing that happened for all of us that summer was that the U.S. Girls Olympic team beat the Russians for the first time ever and as somebody who has always loved and admired gymnasts, I remember that pretty clearly as being a fantastic moment that made us all feel really patriotic, but also there was a real girl power kind of moment. I am very excited this week to welcome Shannon Miller to the empowered health podcast who is the one who sort of led the team to the gold and has gone on to do really incredible work helping women who have ovarian cancer. Not just raising awareness about ovarian cancer, but more specifically talking about the aftermath of it, how your life changes in your perspective, changes after you have faced a very serious illness like ovarian cancer and for her, especially having had little kids at the time, what that was like. We're also going to get into a discussion about kids in sports today and how different it is than when she was sort of coming up. That, you know, is probably worth spending some time on because kids are getting put into these programs where there are really rigorously training or their parents are pulling them out of school and homeschooling them so that they can have more time to practice. We hear about kids getting Tommy John Surgery and other things where they've sort of blown out their shoulder or their arm from baseball before they even get to college. Shannon's going to tell us about how, you know she ate the food that her mom cooked for her. She wasn't on some sort of really strict nutrition regimen. She was living at home, going to public school.

Shannon Miller: I am [Shannon Miller](https://shannonmiller.com/)<sup>1</sup>, Olympic gold medalist, mother of two and an ovarian cancer survivor.

Emily Kumler: We are so excited to have you on. I think a lot of people know you [as a fantastic young gymnast](#)<sup>2</sup>, winning the gold, [the big smile](#)<sup>3</sup>, all of that great stuff, but I don't think as many people know you as [an ovarian cancer survivor](#)<sup>4</sup>, and [ovarian cancer](#)<sup>5</sup> is one of these terrible kinds of cancers that really creeps up on women. I think it's very scary for people to hear about ovarian cancer, which is part of the reason I was excited to talk to you about it and very excited that you're trying to bring more awareness to the topic. I think

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<sup>1</sup> <https://shannonmiller.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://shannonmiller.com/news/shannon-miller-wins-gold-medal-1996-atlanta-olympics>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/shannonmiller96/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed](https://www.instagram.com/shannonmiller96/?utm_source=ig_embed)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/shannon-miller-olympian-ovarian-cancer>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ovarian-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20375941>

maybe if you want to just begin by talking a little bit about how you found out you had it.

Shannon Miller: You're right. Ovarian cancer is very scary for many reasons. One, it often comes out of the blue, so we think, because a lot of the symptoms are those that women go through every month. Things like bloating and maybe sudden weight loss or weight gain, stomach aches, things like that, things you can kind of pass off as, 'oh well I just, you know, ate something bad or it's that time of the month.' And that's kind of how it happened with me. I was having some stomach aches, I was kind of having some bloating but you know, you just don't immediately think of ovarian cancer. And a lot of the time we think of ovarian cancer as an older person's disease and it's not top of mind. And I really didn't know what the symptoms or signs were, so I just kind of completely forgot that I had even been having these stomach aches until my husband actually reminded me about it after I was diagnosed and [I was doing an interview with, actually it was with Robin Roberts](#)<sup>6</sup>, and she had asked me if I had any signs or symptoms and I said no. And he talked to me afterwards and he said, do you remember all those stomach aches you were telling me about? One day I was doubled over, and I called him at his office because I didn't think I could get our son out of his crib. I was in so much pain, I had completely forgotten about that. So I think for me it was seemingly out of the blue, but when I look back, there were those signs. But I think that's what makes it scary. That combined with the fact that by the time that it's diagnosed, it's often at a later stage, things have progressed, and I think that makes it very difficult. One thing that [I've really been focused on is creating awareness](#)<sup>7</sup> and certainly raising funds for research and the importance of post-treatment and recovery, but really getting awareness about the signs and symptoms so that we can catch it as early as possible. Because a lot of people don't realize that there is not a test or a scan or anything available that detects ovarian cancer.

Emily Kumler: Oh, so you went in for an annual GYN exam. You didn't even mention the symptoms, it sounds like.

Shannon Miller: I didn't. I actually went into my doctor's appointment and I will be very upfront that I almost canceled that appointment. I had actually called up to cancel because I realized I was going to be out of town on the date that my appointment was scheduled. I thought, you know what? It's the end of the year. We've got holidays. I'm crazy with work. I've got my son who was about 10 or 11 months old at the time. No, no. He had just turned a year old at the time. There was so much going on. I thought, I'll just push it until next year. I feel fine and I called up to cancel the appointment and as I was waiting on hold, I just felt this incredible amount of guilt because here I am an advocate for

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ktul.com/archive/shannon-miller-fighting-ovarian-cancer>

<sup>7</sup> <https://shannonmiller.com/news/shannon-miller-honored-for-cancer-awareness-efforts>

women's health, that's what I do on a daily basis, and here I am doing the exact same thing I'm asking other women not to do.

Shannon Miller: And so I took the first available, which happened to be that very morning. And it was that morning that I went in and told my doctor I felt fine, thought I could get in and out in 15 minutes, and he found a baseball sized [cyst on my left ovary](#)<sup>8</sup> and my world changed.

Emily Kumler: And so he found that with an immediate ultrasound?

New Speaker: No, it was a [pelvic exam](#)<sup>9</sup>.

Emily Kumler: Wow.

New Speaker: That's how he detected it. And that kind of, we didn't know what it was. And so that was, you know, four to six weeks of 'what kind of tests are available to help us kind of understand what's going on?' And then, ultimately, we didn't know it was cancer until after I woke up from surgery.

Emily Kumler: It had not [metastasized](#).<sup>10</sup> Is that right?

Shannon Miller: Correct. I was very, very fortunate that they caught it so early. A lot of times, even on a pelvic exam, they're not detected because they can kind of hide. So I was very lucky. I was also very fortunate. My doctor was extremely proactive in immediately consulting with a [gynecologic oncologist](#),<sup>11</sup> which I didn't realize at the time, but there are very few of those in the country for us to be able to consult right away with a specialist and to make sure that we were getting him all the tests that he needed. And then, ultimately, sitting in his office, he said, well I think it might go away because women get cysts all the time. They can come and go and so it doesn't necessarily mean it's cancer. And he said, 'let me do one more ultrasound here in the office because I can just kind of see better doing it, kind of like a live ultrasound.' That was when he said, 'no, it's a mass. It's definitely not going away and we need to figure out what it is, so you need to schedule for surgery now.'

Emily Kumler: So, how did you feel at that moment?

Shannon Miller: You know, it's interesting because I think anyone who has kind of gone through the process of wait and observe: those are horrific words to hear because you don't want to wait, you don't want to observe, you just want to know what it is and get it taken care of. And so for me, the first portion, that first four to six weeks of waiting and observing, and meanwhile we were

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ovarian-cysts/symptoms-causes/syc-20353405>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/pelvic-exam/about/pac-20385135>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cancer/multimedia/cancer/vid-20084738>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/departments-centers/gynecologic-oncology/overview/ovc-20424080>

doing whatever tests we could, but, that was really hard for me. I look at that first phase as one of the most difficult, and I hesitate to say that, because it's all difficult. But, the constant questions and very few answers and this loss of control that you know, sure, I had been this athlete for the better part of my life, an elite athlete, where my job was to know what was going on in my body, what my body was doing at all times. I now had no control, no idea what was going on. And so that was difficult. But the day I sat in his office, he said, I think we'll wait and observe. And I said, wait, does that mean the clock starts over? I have to wait and observe for another four to six weeks? And I think my husband, his first reaction was interesting because he was happy that, okay, well that means that maybe it's not so bad. That was kind of his thought process. My thought process was, I don't want to wait to observe anymore. I just want this over with. I need to know. I feel like I'm walking around like a zombie hoping it doesn't twist or fold or wrap around. He said, let me do another ultrasound. And within two minutes he said, no, this isn't going away, we're going to schedule you for surgery. And at that point, everything changed for me. It was this breath of fresh air of, okay, we're just going to get it out and I can kind of deal with the aftermath, but at least I'll know what we're dealing with. And I think for me, that was kind of the point where I could start, I don't want to say living again, but just feeling like we were really making some forward motion. Now granted, going into surgery was very difficult: not knowing what I would wake up to. But, I think in that moment in his office, understanding, okay, we're going to take care of it, we're gonna take it out, that was for me the best news I could hear at that moment.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. You know, it's so interesting. I think the human mind has such a hard time dealing with ambiguity, right? It's like that 'what's going to happen? Okay. I've weighed all the different options and the negatives are really serious.' Right? And so it's like, you don't want to go to a negative and people are like, stay positive! You're like 'stay positive? This isn't. . . No one's giving me any answers! How am I supposed to stay positive?' You know, it's interesting because in this podcast we've covered a lot of different sorts of women's health topics. There is an undercurrent in all of them of women feeling a sense of relief when they get a diagnosis because either they've been ignored or their symptoms haven't been treated as physiological symptoms. Like, oftentimes women are told like, 'oh, you know, maybe you're depressed or sort of more of a mental side of things' and they, you know, feel like they have to advocate for themselves in a sort of aggressive way. But I think to your point, it's like, you know, this thing is growing in you, right? And you're like, can somebody just get it out? Like what are we messing around with, right? And it's almost like this idea of when it's your body versus somebody else's body is a really interesting one, too. And so the fact that your husband had such a different, you know, he's sort of hoping that this is no big deal and that it's fine

and that life will return to normal and you're like, 'nope, this isn't normal. I know my body and like, how was I growing this thing?' That's fascinating, right?

Shannon Miller: It is. And it's very hard and I'm a pretty positive person, but you have this sense that something's not right. And I think the more people would tell me, 'Oh, you'll be fine. Oh, it'll be okay. Oh, it's likely nothing. Don't worry. Don't worry.' It was kind of like the more that people told me that, I understood where it was coming from because I've done that a million times, but I don't do it anymore, but I know that they want to make you feel better and that's so good, it comes from such a good place and in a good heart. But on my side of it, it was, 'but wait, how do you know? If I don't know, and the doctor doesn't know, how do you know it's going to be okay?' And it just kind of would get those fears stirred up again.

Emily Kumler: Right, yeah, you're like don't knock on wood, like don't Jinx it, you know?

Shannon Miller: And then at the same time, you know, being a new mom wondering, you know, all of those horrible questions of, you know, is my son going to have a mother? And I can hardly say that without breaking down, but it's all of those thoughts go through your mind and you're dealing with that 24/7 during this wait and observe period. So, I think the moment that I woke up from surgery and found out what it was, it was kind of okay. It was ovarian cancer, a rare form of ovarian cancer, but they caught it early. So, my prognosis was good. So I understand I was very fortunate in kind of what I woke up to, but at the same time, okay, now you're going to need to go through a pretty aggressive chemotherapy treatment. What are the positives and negatives of that? And all those things. But, I think at that point I kind of in my mind reverted back to a lot of those lessons learned through sport. Kind of that competitive mentality of, okay, now I know what we're dealing with, now I'm going to take the next forward step, I'm going to set some goals. I can kind of be part of the process moving forward versus just kind of twiddling my thumbs not knowing what's going on.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. So talk to me a little bit about that because I think your background certainly informs your approach to how you think about post-care. It sounds like it got you through chemo, but also like sort of the work you're doing now? Can you talk a little bit about like what is life like? Like, what is the new normal? For lack of a better way of saying that.

Shannon Miller: It's very interesting. I'll kind of give some of the things I learned along the way. I think, you know, the first thing is no one's experience is exactly like someone else's and my mother's a cancer survivor. I watched her go through it, and we had a lot of similarities in our treatment. Completely different, non-genetically connected cancer. But I watched her go through

chemo and radiation and surgery and kind of what she had to miss through all of that. It was difficult to watch as a daughter. I'm very thankful that I had someone that I could depend on and talk to with regard to post-care because one of the things that you don't always realize is just because you finished treatment, even if you get an 'okay, you're cancer free, you're in remission,' those are great things. But that doesn't mean all of a sudden the next day you're one hundred percent. My doctor did a good job. He was very upfront with me. He knows I don't like surprises. So he was very upfront with me with regard to treatment and that I was going to lose my hair and that it was going to be very difficult. It was a very aggressive form of chemotherapy. It was going to be a challenge and afterwards it was going to take me six months to a year to kind of start feeling like myself again. Now, I'm a little competitive. So, here I'm thinking, 'oh, six to 12 months, I'll do it in three, no problem.' And then as you get closer to the finish line, 'oh no, I'll feel better in a month. I can't possibly feel this bad a month from now if I've finished treatment.' And so you talk yourself into this idea that you're going to just go back to life as normal and it's going to happen pretty quickly. And I think that's when we kind of set ourselves up for some really difficult times because the fact is your body's going through a lot. And so it does take time. You're going to have stuff, I had the fatigue and I always explain the fatigue. It's not like you're tired. It is lying in bed in the morning, feeling like each limb weighs a thousand pounds. And I can remember mornings taking 15 minutes just in my mind to try to figure out how I'm going to move one leg five inches to the right so I can begin to even think about sitting up. It is a different, it's a different animal. And I have never, I mean, in all my years of training, I had never felt fatigued like that. And it lasts. There's the nausea and the [neuropathy](#)<sup>12</sup> and all of those things. So, your body is doing a lot. So, I think as a patient, kind of wrapping your mind around this idea that it's not going to be okay, I'm not going to go back to work. I'm not going to go back to being, you know, all hands on deck as a mother, as a coworker, as all of these things immediately. That's really important. The other side of that is kind of the understanding that, you know, when you're going through treatment, you have this incredible team, you've got medical staff and you've got friends and family and neighbors and everyone is willing to pitch in and help out. It is an amazing thing to have so much help along the way, but a lot of times, these amazing caregivers, they're going through it with you. They are right there. The emotions and the difficulties and the concern and all of that is difficult on the caregivers as well and I know that from the daughter's perspective. So, when there is the all clear, at the end of treatment, a lot of times for the caregiver it's 'okay, we can breathe now, we can get back to life as normal.' But for the patient, life is not normal yet. And so kind of helping

caregivers understand, 'hey, I'm not there yet. I'll get there. But just, you know, I'm going to need a little bit of time to kind of get back to this new normal.' And then, understanding how to find that team post-treatment. Because you need to overnight, you no longer have your medical staff. Now, you're seeing your doctor maybe a couple times a year versus every single day people aren't knocking on your door to bring you over dinner anymore.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. But I mean I feel like in some ways it sounds like setting the expectation that like you have nine weeks of chemotherapy, but actually, the six months of recovery is still treatment. I mean like you're still going through it, right? So instead of setting the standard at like, okay, it's going to be about two months, let's say it's going to be about a year. I'm going to need meals delivered or people checking in on me, you know what I mean? Like, I think that is probably a huge piece of advice for people.

Shannon Miller: It is. I think it's really important and it's important to kind of take that advice to heart ourselves as patients. Because we want to get back, we want to do things normally again, but at the same time we have to be patient with ourselves as well because it can be very depressing. It can be very difficult if you're kind of impatient with yourself. And I'm very fortunate, I had my mom, I called her up a couple of weeks after chemo and, and just kind of broke down. 'I don't feel any better. Everything, nothing has changed. I'm still sick, I'm sick. He still can't open a bottle of water.' You know, all of these things. And she just said, 'look, stop thinking about it. Just do what you can each day just like you've been doing. When we talk, because we talk a lot, we're not even talk about it for two weeks. Just don't be thinking about, you know, what's changed. Just for two weeks, let's not even talk about it. And then, in two weeks, let me know how you're doing. And then two weeks after that, let's check in on kind of the symptoms and that portion of it.' And it was wonderful to kind of have someone to talk to about it who had kind of been there, done that. And that's one of the reasons why I work and partner with different groups and one of them is called [Our Way Forward](https://www.ourwayforward.com/)<sup>13</sup> and it's a great program, but it really brings a community together so that patients, caregivers, even doctors, can be a part of this community of post-treatment where yeah, you might be finished, but you're still, like you said, you're still in treatment. It's just post-treatment,.

Emily Kumler: Right? It's like we're so good in society about sort of the acute phase. I feel this way about like when somebody dies, right? Like everybody goes to the wake and the funeral and they're there. And maybe for, you know, a week later bringing food or maybe a month later, but like that family or that person who's lost somebody is still grieving. I think when everybody sort of goes away that person really needs the support because

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ourwayforward.com/>

then they're all alone. And I think we do this with babies too, right? Like you have a baby and everybody wants to celebrate for like the first couple of weeks and then all of a sudden you're like, 'hello, I have a baby! I need help. Where is everybody?'

Shannon Miller: Which is about the exact same time the baby stopped sleeping.

Emily Kumler: Totally! Exactly. Right. Right. And so it's so interesting because I feel like this idea of isolation plays such an important role in depression and all of these other kinds of auxiliary, you know, negative experiences that people go through when they go through something that is as life altering as a, you know, sort of cancer diagnosis and treatment would be. I think the idea of having a real plan in place that extends like maybe twice as long as you want it to, right? Anybody who's ever had surgery or any kind of medical intervention, I feel like they always give you like the unhealthy person's timeline, right? So if you're healthy, you're like, 'all right. Yeah, I can totally see how I would say like, oh well it'll take me half that.' Right? But, it's like that's a different kind of standard, right? That's not a standard of care where actually everybody's going through this intensive kind of thing. And when people do that, it's what is required and kind of saying to yourself, 'if I need less, great, but I'm going to plan on this because this is what's been recommended for me. And I'll call off the troops if it seems like I'm better and I'm back to myself. Like wouldn't that'd be great if I could do that early?'

Shannon Miller: Well, and it's surrounding yourself with that team. And so whether that's going into meetings and yeah, I know a lot of folks who will say, 'I don't want to go and talk about my issues' and I understand that. For anyone that has followed my career, I was extremely shy growing up. There was no chance I wanted to go around the United States talking about my ovaries. That was not in my life plan. But, sometimes when you do talk about, or even just sit and listen to others, it really helps you understand that you're not alone. And for me, I was very fortunate that I had people that reached out, would reach directly out to me. You know, whether that was social media, or an email, or a good old fashioned letter, they would reach out to me. And what I realized was how much that helped me in understanding that I was not alone. Hearing their stories, hearing stories of family members or friends that had gone through something similar was so beneficial to me. And that's really why I started being more outspoken about my issue. Because I wanted others to see that they are not alone. You know, cancer doesn't care if you have gold medals or not. Our health is important because it's our health. And a really important aspect is just continuing whatever the post-treatment plan looks like for you. Surround yourself with people. You know, whatever kind of communication that is, whether it's people you've never met or people that you depend on every day,

but just make sure you're talking with people, listening to people, and really not isolating yourself because that's when it was very difficult to handle. No one needs to go through this on their own. You need it. It needs to be a team effort.

Emily Kumler: Talk a little bit about the parallels for you. I mean, it sounds like a little bit with your mom, the conversations you were having with her, like she was kind of coaching you through this? And I understand you would give yourself pep talks, you know, fairly frequently or every day to try and help you through it. Can you talk a little bit about how that was helpful or like what did those pep talks sound like?

Shannon Miller: Well, the pep talks for me were really prior to chemotherapy. So, I had about a four week period between surgery and when I started chemotherapy, maybe it might've been, you know, six or so weeks. And at that point, kind of my competitive mentality had kicked in and I kind of reverted back to a lot of those lessons learned through sports. So, goal setting and perseverance and the idea of teamwork and getting up each day just kind of giving it your best shot, not winning, not being perfect, but just let's get up and what can I do today to kind of take that next forward step. And so these pep talks were, you know, getting ready for chemotherapy. I understood that this was, [BEP](#)<sup>14</sup> was the regimen I was on, and it was what my doctor called the hit him hard hit him fast approach. And so it was going to be very intense gearing up for that, gearing up for this idea that I was going to lose my hair, that I was going to be weaker, that I was going to have to figure out how to take care of, you know, our son and do this and run my business and try to also really make my health priority in every sense. I would give myself these pep talks of, 'okay, you can do this. Hey, your body went through training for the Olympic Games. You know, it did that. You trained seven hours a day, six days a week. You can do this.' And you know, it's a locker room pep talk. You tell yourself anything to kind of get yourself revved up and ready to go. And then the first week of chemotherapy hit and I realized that it was a lot more difficult than I'd ever expected. It was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. It was just incredible and it really helped me understand in a way that maybe I hadn't before the importance of living every moment to the fullest and really appreciating each moment. And so, every day I would have my goals, my goals for that day. And there were many days where the goal was to get up and get dressed. And if I could walk twice around the dining room table, I could check the box. And that was a successful day for me. Now, it wasn't the, you know, best shape of my life standing up there on the gold medal platform, but it was just as thrilling because it was this idea that I was taking that next forward step. And so for me, it was just keeping things in perspective, keeping goals set,

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-in-general/treatment/cancer-drugs/drugs/bep>

taking one step forward and just making sure that I was appreciating every day that I had.

Emily Kumler: And so what happens on the days where you can't make it around the dining room table twice? Like, were there days where you couldn't meet your goal?

Shannon Miller: Yeah, there were days I didn't get out of bed. And I think on those days, it's just like when you don't meet your personal expectations or your goals in anything. You know, for me, you know, looking at sport, I didn't always succeed. In fact, most of my career is filled with failures. People forget, once you win a gold medal, people forget about the thousand other times you fell, right? I didn't forget because I fell all those times, but I don't look at failure as a negative. I look at failure as a part of success. It's a learning experience. Okay, well what did I learn about today? Maybe it was, you know, that I need to talk to my doctor about the different medications or maybe I need to express that I'm not feeling any better or you know, x, y and z isn't happening. One thing that happened early on: I was put back in the hospital after the first week of chemo. I couldn't keep down food. I couldn't keep down water. They hooked me up to IVs. I went through, I don't know how many nausea medications, and not one of them even phased me. At that point, it was a complete failure. I mean, I don't even know if I'm going to be able to continue with this treatment if I can't keep water down. It was kind of hitting that bottom. Then it was, 'okay, well what do I do now?' And granted, I mean, my faith has always been first and foremost. So that kind of is the lens that I look through things with. And so it's 'okay, well, what do I do now? I'm not going to accept that I'm just done. So what's my next forward step?' And being able to kind of hit that failure is what allowed me to talk to my doctor about, 'I can't continue to do this, what is there? None of these medications are working for me. What other options do we have?' And that's not typically something I would have done. I would have just probably said, 'okay, I just have to deal with it.' I wouldn't have spoken up it. I've changed now. Now, I'll speak up about anything. But I think back then, I would've just suffered in silence and not wanted to be a complainer and just kind of dealt with it on my own, even if that meant stopping treatment. But I was able to kind of find the courage through that failure to say 'we need to figure something else out.' And that's when we figured out [home hydration](http://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/treatments/home-hydration)<sup>15</sup>. So I would hydrate through my port twice a day, every single day, and my world changed after that. So, it's kind of one of those things. You learn something. And I had many failures along the way, many failures post-treatment, but I learned something each time and then I would kind of get back up and keep

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/treatments/home-hydration>

going. And I think as long as you get back up and keep going, then you're winning.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. I mean I have such a problem with the word failure because I feel like there's such finality to it, right? Like it's the end. And it's not. It doesn't have to be, certainly. Right? And I think in most periods of growth, it's the beginning, right? Like you've realized something's not working and you have to come up with something else. That then stretches you and grows you to a place where you could make really powerful choices and progress and all kinds of really wonderful things come out of that. The idea that like failure is the end of something is just misleading, right? And it's like, I give you a lot of credit for that because I think when your body is taxed the way that it is when it goes through chemotherapy and, you know, your spirits, like I can't imagine, you know, with a little kid at home too, this is a really, you know, painful situation that you're going through. And to find that strength to say like, 'nope, there's got to be another option that's going to work for me,' it takes a lot of strength. Right?

Shannon Miller: Well, and I would love to think I just possess that kind of strength. But, I'm very fortunate I was able to have so much feedback from others and communicate with others. [Scott Hamilton](http://scotthamilton.com/)<sup>16</sup> was one of the first folks that reached out. Many people know his story and he's written [an entire book](http://scotthamilton.com/book/)<sup>17</sup>, an amazing book, on the importance of failure. And you know, I think as an athlete you learn that, but it is so important for every single person, sports or not sports, to understand that failure is just a part of living. It's part of success. And so that's what I kind of kept having to remember. Not that it's always easy. And especially I think for me it was less about the physical failures. I was kind of, I know how to handle that. Again, I was an athlete. I know how to handle failure when I have the failure. But, there were times when I felt like a failure as a mom. Here I am sick in bed all day and I can't be with my son. I'm not able to play with him in the way that I would want to. You know, what am I missing? What about that time that I'm not able to do things and be with my son in the way that I want to be this great mom? And then of course as a new mom, you want to be perfect. And we all know that's not reality. But at the time, it was very challenging, very difficult to be in bed and then hear him playing with someone else in the next room. And knowing that I just wasn't there was difficult. But then of course, looking back now, I realize. And hindsight is always 20/20, but yeah, I'm very blessed that he was so young when I was going through that because at the time he didn't care that I was bald. He didn't care if I wore a wig or not and he doesn't really remember any of it. So you know, there's a blessing in disguise I suppose as well.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://scotthamilton.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://scotthamilton.com/book/>

Emily Kumler: As a part of the sort of like post-treatment recovery, going back to life stuff, I feel like the perspective completely switches after you've had something like this happen, especially when it's sort of unexpected, right? Like you were going to cancel the appointment, you weren't expecting to find anything wrong, and then you do. How do you then psychologically face the world in a way? It sounds like you were empowered through your sense of self advocacy, but you know, it still is like now the world is sort of an unsafe place in a new way.

Shannon Miller: It is very interesting. And I think my perspective changed a lot in many ways and maybe not so much in other ways. But I think one way was with my health. And I had already started to focus on health. I launched my company the summer before, focused on women's health. So, I think that focus just intensified. But I think the reality that you can try to be healthy and you can do everything right and things can still happen was a big reality check. We know these things, but we just don't think about them every day. And so I think I started to think about it a little bit more and I probably got maybe a little bit too focused on every little stomach ache, you know, in the last eight years. You know, every time something happens it's 'okay, really think about this, write it down so that if I go to my doctor's appointment, I don't forget to tell him.' And you know, 99.9% of the time, they're nothing, but I don't want to leave it up to chance anymore. So, I'm going to speak up if I have a stomach ache or something doesn't feel right. And so I'm just going to advocate for myself a little bit more than I used to. I'm not going to just push my health to the back burner; I'm going to make it a priority. So that's kind of one area. I think the other area that's changed for me significantly is the idea of really living each day to the fullest. And it's not that I didn't do that, it's just that I am built for forward motion. Ever since I was a kid, you know? [I won five medals at the Olympics in '92](#)<sup>18</sup> and I was back in the gym three days later because I had new skills I wanted to learn. I mean, okay, that's great. Check the box, check, got the medals, and okay, but now what's next? I didn't walk, you know, at college graduation because I was on to law school and it was just kind of always the next thing, for me. And so I think now I just stop and smell the roses and I really appreciate and focus on each thing as it comes.

Emily Kumler: Well, let's be honest here. It's not like you're not driven anymore. Right? Like that hasn't been shot, so, talk about that balance. That's really interesting.

Shannon Miller: Yeah, I know. And I think you hit on a really good point, because the drive is still there. I'm not sitting at home doing nothing. The drive

is still there. I'm still built for forward motion, but I think what I remind myself of is to also live in the moment, don't forget to live today because you're so focused on what's going to happen tomorrow. And I think my kids have really helped me with that, as well. I always give the example, you know, when they were little, I'd leave 10 minutes earlier to go to the car in the morning before school because you know, they'd stop and see a bug along the way and then that's 10 minutes, you know? And so instead of, you know, hustling them into the car, 'no, we've got to go, we've got to get there.' It's 'no, let's stop and talk about the bug. Let's talk about the colors and how many spots it has' and you know, all of these things. But just living in that moment. And kids do such a great job of that. They are wonderful teachers of living in the moment. And so they kind of help me balance that as much as possible because like you said, I'm still very driven so I kind of constantly battle that. But I think they help me keep that balance.

Emily Kumler: And then will you talk a little bit about your business, which is about helping women lead healthier lives?

Shannon Miller: Yeah, absolutely. So, and if anyone wants to check it out, it's [Shannonmiller.com](https://shannonmiller.com/)<sup>19</sup>. But basically, my focus is to create awareness and to really help women make their health a priority. And that is a very large group of things. So it could be everything from [filming 10 minute fitness videos](#)<sup>20</sup> so that you can just go to Youtube, get 10 minutes in. At least 10 minutes is better than nothing, right? So instead of, 'oh my gosh, I'm going to sign up for a 5K and I don't have time to train today, so I'm not going to do anything,' now it's 'I'm going to do 10 minutes. And that's better than nothing.' So, it's just this idea of kind of baby steps and everything in moderation, whether it's nutrition, whether it's physical fitness, whether it's taking time for yourself, which is so hard for women to do, but it's so important whether it's just a little bit of extra sleep, whether it's 15 minutes during the day to read a book and have a cup of tea, or whatever that is. It's important to make that a priority because you end up doing and being better throughout the day. You're more productive, you're more energized, you're more balanced, you're more focused. All of these good things that kind of make everything else work a lot better.

Emily Kumler: Was there any part of your training as a gymnast, when you were younger, that instilled that idea in you?

Shannon Miller: Actually, it was really post-career. Post my gymnastics career. Gymnastics for me was very simple; I had gymnastics and school. Those are really the only two things I ever had to be concerned with. You know, my parents would cook what they cooked and that's what I ate, alongside my

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<sup>19</sup> <https://shannonmiller.com/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://youtu.be/S2Q7cMxgg5E>

sister and brother. And the physical part was taken care of because I worked out 40 plus hours a week. So I really didn't have to think about my health in that way. When I retired from gymnastics, I went through a few years of not really knowing what to do as far as nutrition and fitness. And granted, I mean, this was before basically the internet existed so you couldn't exactly Google. And there wasn't all of this information everywhere at fingertips. So for me, I went from, you know, 40 hours a week of training to zero. I had never been an actual gym where you had to get on a treadmill. I'd never been on a treadmill. That's not what gymnast do. And I had never really thought about nutrition. I all of the sudden moved away from home to continue with my college education. And so I was living on my own and my parents weren't making the meals and I wasn't thinking about vegetables or protein or the proper way to, you know, combine foods as far as making sure my body got all the nutrients it needed. So, I went through a few years of trial and error where, you know, you try the fad diets and they don't work and you try other stuff and it doesn't work. And then I realized I just needed to get serious about researching it and start understanding an everything in moderation approach. I'm not someone who has the willpower to give up chocolate. I just don't. I know that about me now. But, I can eat a little bit each day. I don't need to eat a whole chocolate cake each day. So, as I kind of learned these things about myself and started getting active once again in a non-gymnastics way, I realized that I felt better. I was healthier. I was more energized. I was starting to be more my myself, which from a very shy personality, that was a really big deal for me. It just really changed my world and I thought, wow, if it can be this much of a change for me, coming from a competitive athletic background, what could it be for others? And how many times have I heard my mom say, 'oh, I'll change that doctor's appointment. I've got to take your brother to this game.' Or, 'oh, I'm not going to have time for x, y, or z.' No time for herself and her health because she's busy taking care of everyone else. And that's what we do. And it's a great thing, but it may not be the best thing for our health. And so, just having this idea that making our health a priority is not a selfish act. It is actually a very selfless act.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. It's like there's that great analogy of like, when you're in a plane and they're doing the emergency procedure thing, right? And it's like, you have to put the mask on yourself before you put it on your child, right? You have to take it, you have to be able to breathe, or you won't be able to help them.

Shannon Miller: But how many of us actually live by that every day, right? I mean I have a tough time with it as well, but it's so important and I think if getting out of cancer has taught me anything, it's the importance of taking care of my own health and that, hey, if I need to get to the gym and get a workout or

if I need to get an extra hour of sleep that's not being selfish. I'm going to be a better person, a better mom, a better worker, a better everything, if I'm healthy.

Emily Kumler: Absolutely. And I think that threat, probably, of feeling like your life could be taken away from you, is an impetus for really making that a model for yourself. And then, obviously, you're modeling it for the rest of us, which is great.

Shannon Miller: Hopefully others will not have to go through that to focus on their health. And I shouldn't have. I should've been more focused on my health, but you know, it's just one of those things. All right, well now I'm going to do it.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. Well and it's also interesting to me because I feel like from an outside perspective, you think gymnasts or elite athletes are so fine tuned. And you know, I think a lot of this stuff has probably also changed from when we were kids because now you know these gymnasts, or any athletes, like I was actually just saying to Jill, like I have a good friend whose kids play softball and baseball and they are almost 10. And it's like, they're in clinics every week and they're like staying in hotels. Like I was just talking to the mom and I was like, she's at a different hotel with other families like every weekend. Like it's insanity and it's like this isn't pro sports, right? Like they're trying to win like the local contest! And it's so intense. It's like every day after school. And I think there's something about that that is, you know, kind of incredible that these kids are being trained at that kind of high level. But there's also something that feels not quite right. Like, that's almost like robbing them of, you know, the idea of just like have fun, go play. Like, oh, you guys are going to play like pickup baseball. Awesome. You know, like so-and-so is really good. Maybe they should get some extra training. So, you were saying that you had training like 40 hours a week, but you went to like a regular school or you were homeschooled through the gymnastics program?

Shannon Miller: No, I went to public school. My parents didn't know anything about the Olympics or Olympic training or anything. It was, you know, I started gymnastics because they were tired of me and my sister ruining their furniture. I mean, we would just try to, you know, do back flips. So she's like, 'okay, get off my couch and I will sign you up for gymnastics.' And we just, you know, went to whoever was in the phone book. I just loved it. And so, you know, I have to try, especially with my kids, I have to be careful because I want them to have the ability to try lots of different sports and I want them to be well rounded and have time for their homework and all of those things, and pursue their dreams if there is a certain sport that they love or whatnot. For me, I just zeroed in on gymnastics right away and my parents didn't have the money to have us in a bunch of different sports. So, it was kind of, okay, you know, pick

your after school thing and that's what you'll do. And I loved it. In fact, my coach early on had asked my parents if I could come in I think twice a week or three times a week instead of just the one hour a week. And my parents said no. They flat out said 'no, that's too much for her. She's so young.' And I begged, oh, I begged and pleaded until my father, said, 'I will just take her. It's going to be so much, she's going to be tired of it in two weeks and we're off the hook.' Famous last words. But no, they were of the mind that education comes first. My Dad is a physics professor. My mom worked full time. So, it was 'education comes first because anything can happen in sports. We want you to be active, but you're not going to put all your eggs in one basket. We're going to get your education.' So, I went to public school and I think that also helped me kind of maintain a balance. And home school wasn't, at the time, you know, we're talking decades and decades ago, it was not the same as it is now. So. But I think for me, it was important to kind of have that outlet at school where I didn't have to think about gymnastics. So if I had tough skill I working on or it wasn't going as well as I thought, I didn't have to think about it. And then when I was at the gym, school didn't exist. That math test the next day didn't exist until I got home.

Emily Kumler: How do you compare that to what it's like for the girls today? Just in terms of like the sort of rigor that kids are put through today. Like, you know, you hear about with baseball, like all of these kids getting this like [shoulder surgery](#)<sup>21</sup> that like professional athletes used to be [the only ones who ever needed](#)<sup>22</sup> this, right? Because they've like worn out their shoulder from pitching or something crazy. And it's like, I just sort of wonder about, as a mom, looking at this and like how much joy you got from your sport. Like, do you think that we've gone too far?

Shannon Miller: I think as a mom it's always this constant 'am I doing the right thing?' And I think my parents did a really good job of kind of letting me lead the way in a lot of ways. Their philosophy was, you know, you don't get to quit just because things got a little bit tough. You know, if you've made a commitment, you know, sometimes with their pocket book, you know, if you've made a six month commitment or a year commitment, then you know, unless it's something dangerous, then you finished out your commitment and then we can discuss what comes next. Now, that doesn't mean that you get to sit home and watch TV. It just means that, you know, hey, if sports change, you know, you might want to go on to something else. I think that was good because it kind of helped me understand commitment and a focus, but also the understanding that gymnastics wasn't the be all end all. You know, if I, if I decided one day I didn't want to do it and then I fulfilled my commitment, then

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.webmd.com/children/news/20190412/foul-ball-more-kids-having-tommy-john-surgery>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/tommy-john-surgery-ucl-reconstruction#1>

okay, then let's go to the next thing. Gymnastics is not life. Life is life. So I think that's good. And I think that the approach I take as a mom is, you know, kind of letting my kids lead to some degree, as far as what they're interested in. Now my kids are both, they just kind of love every sport. So neither of them have really zeroed in on a specific sport that they want to pursue. And I think that's fine. I think you'll find coaches today that say, you know, an athlete is more well rounded and are actually a better athlete when they play more than one sport.

Emily Kumler: Yeah. There was a [great documentary](#)<sup>23</sup> that just came out that we can link to, I'm forgetting what it's called. You might've seen it, but it was talking to like very high level athletes about how well rounded they were. And like [Wayne Gretzky](#)<sup>24</sup> is on there and his dad is talking about how he would be like, 'stop with the hockey, like go play baseball or go, like, do something else.' And that, you know, probably made him better athlete in some ways, too, that he had these other experiences to draw on.

Shannon Miller: Yeah. So it's, it's interesting, but I think holding off on competition is probably not always a bad thing. Kids are going to learn how to compete. I don't think there's anything really wrong with competition, but I think there is an importance of learning the fundamentals of the game. For me, in gymnastics, I didn't compete for the first three or four years of my career. Well, I went to parades, you know, you'd get to show off your skills at the local parade.

Emily Kumler: Perfect!

Shannon Miller: Exactly, yeah! You worked on skills and you worked on the fundamentals. What's the best way to walk down the beam forwards and backwards? What's the best way to do x, y, or z? And it really gave you that foundation that you needed to get those larger skills. And so, I think that's important. And that's kind of what I want to focus on with my kids is just number one: are they having fun? Now, that doesn't mean that every day is going to be a piece of cake, but are they enjoying the sport? Are they enjoying the idea of teamwork? Are they understanding the importance of, you know, setting goals? Even if today the goal might just be to hit one ball, you know, what kind of goals are you setting? My son did his first duathlon a couple of years ago. It was the first time that I couldn't like run beside him. He was just old enough to kind of go out on the course alone. And I remember waiting at the end for him to finish the first running portion and he wasn't coming in. And I thought, well, you know, he's not a slow runner. He's not the fastest, but he's in the mix. And I was thinking, 'oh, did he go the wrong way? Did he fall? Should I start looking for him?' And about that time I saw him standing in the middle of the road and he's looking back in the direction that he came from. And I'm thinking, 'what? You

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.insearchofgreatness.com/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nhl.com/player/wayne-gretzky-8447400>

know, what are you doing? You run forward, the finish line is over here!' And when I finally asked him afterwards, he said, 'oh, I was just waiting for my friend. I was waiting for him to catch up.' I thought, 'oh, you know, that's really sweet.' And at the finish line, when he finally finished, he said, 'mom, did I win?' Well, you know, how do you answer that? You got to think quick. And I said, 'well, I don't think you came in first. But what was your goal? What was your goal for the duathlon?' And he said, 'well, to make friends.' And I said, 'well, did you make friends?' He said, 'yeah.' I said, 'then you hit your goal. And I think that's a really important thing. What is your goal?' You know? Yeah, you can win at the local level. You can win at the regional level. That's great. Did you lose? And how did you deal with it when you lost? Did you have a challenge that you've got to work through? That you had to figure out? Did you have something where you had to maybe work with your team to succeed? You know, what are those lessons that you're learning along the way? That's what I care about. Win, lose. I don't care what the score is at this stage. I mean, my kids are six and nine at this stage. The score is less important. What matters is the lessons that you're learning now because that's what's going to carry over into life.

Emily Kumler: I think that's such a good message. And I feel like we should probably talk a little bit about [the Larry Nassar stuff](#)<sup>25</sup> because that obviously is important. I actually think I saw [a PBS interview](#)<sup>26</sup> that you did where you talked a little bit about, you know, sort of some of the common sense protocols that should be in place and it's sort of ridiculous that they haven't been in place. But were you aware of any of that stuff going on or were you sort of out of it and caught off guard when it all started to break loose? Because it sounds like the Michigan stuff, at least there were a lot of people who sort of did know that this was kind of a problem.

Shannon Miller: Yeah, no, this was . . . I don't even know if saying 'a shock' does it justice. I mean it's kind of one of those things, as an athlete, as a parent, how does this happen? And I think the reality started, gosh, a couple of years ago. I think when something like this happens, you go, 'what can I do?' You know, I don't really, I don't own a gym. I'm not a coach. I'm not really kind of living in that world. You know, I do some analysis and commentary, but that's kind of on the TV side. So, what can I do? I started working with, volunteering with, a group called the [Monique Burr Foundation](#)<sup>27</sup>. It's all about child safety. So, they've trained over 3 million people in their curriculum that's geared toward all forms of abuse. So whether that's sexual abuse, any type of physical abuse,

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/sports/larry-nassar-gymnastics-abuse.html>

<sup>26</sup>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/shannon-miller-on-how-to-protect-gymnasts-from-abuse-change-stars-with-accountability-education>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/>

digital danger, cyber bullying, bullying. I mean the cyber bullying is intense with children, and it starts at such an early age. It has just been mind boggling to begin [working with them](#)<sup>28</sup> and kind of understanding what kids are having to go through. And mine were so young, you know, when I started working with them. But what they've began, and they have launched, and I'm very proud to be part of that team, [is a focus on sports](#)<sup>29</sup>, youth sports, making sure that their curriculum, kind of has that sports focus as well. And I think that's really important because you can train adults and there's lots of focus on 'let's train the coaches and let's train the administration.' And that's really important. I mean, I've gone through training a couple of different times for different things with regard to my kid's schools. I had to go through six hours of training just to go on a field trip to the symphony with my son. Not even as a chaperone, just as a parent. But you do that because you want to make sure that we're doing the very best we can for our kids.

Emily Kumler: And good for your kid's school that they have that as a rule.

Shannon Miller: Absolutely. It makes you feel good as a parent. Not that anything can't happen. I mean, I think there's two things. I mean, one is that you have to arm children with the resources and the tools that they need to spot red flags to have the courage and understanding that they can speak up. And, who is it that they're going to speak to? Because my daughter's safe adult may not be her friend's safe adult. Unfortunately, the statistics show that often the perpetrator is a family member. So, it's upsetting and it's such a difficult topic. But, I think what, if anything, we can take from this and from the survivors, and I think we only do justice to them if we actually make changes and actually say, 'you know what, we're not going to keep this quiet.' That's when all of these things can happen. You have to bring it into the sunlight. You have to bring it out. You have to talk about things that none of us want to talk about. I mean, we just don't. We don't want to think about it. We don't want to talk about it. But I've kind of been forcing myself to do that. It can happen anytime, anywhere. And so we all have to be vigilant as parents, as adults, as caregivers, as kids, and as teachers. We just all have to have that community and that feeling of kind of being able to look out for each other and also understanding our ability to speak up and speak out when something isn't right.

Emily: Absolutely. It was a treat talking to you and I think all this is really powerful information that's important for women to know and sort of just have on their radar, whether it's personally you're going through something, or you have a friend who is, and I think that kind of reminder that like, you know, when somebody is done with treatment for something, it doesn't mean they're done,

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smlvL98xIYU>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/why-use-our-programs/mbf-athlete-safety-matters/>

right? And even this psychological shift of how you're thinking about life is probably best suited for like really intimate sweet conversations with the people who you're close with, right? For you to sort of explain to them how you're smelling the roses in a different way than you were a year ago, or how, you know, you're not so interested in doing certain things and you're more interested in doing others, or how you're thinking about being a mom. I think all that stuff resonates across the board with anybody who's going through something that is anywhere near as challenging as ovarian cancer. So, I applaud you for everything you're doing and also for being brave enough to share your story.

Shannon Miller: Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

Emily: Well I really enjoyed this, we covered a lot of stuff and I could like keep talking to you forever. My only regret is that we're not in person so we can do some silly tumbling together, which maybe someday we'll get to do which would be really fun.

Shannon Miller: Give me a heads up so I can stretch.

Emily: I think you'll be just fine. I hope you enjoyed the conversation with Shannon Miller. I wanted to just thank her again for generously sharing her story with us and also to follow up the movie that I referenced, the documentary about kids and athleticism and how it used to be and looking at the world's best athletes and how they got there and what their philosophy was about pursuing that is called in search of greatness. And I highly recommend it for anybody who has kids who are playing sports. It might even be fun to watch together. You have these really incredible athletes talking about their experiences and how they in many cases felt like they weren't actually the best. And so they had to find a way of using their minds to come up with a creative advantage. And they obviously do. It also is about pressure and about parents putting pressure on their kids to perform versus kids putting pressure on themselves to perform. And I recently posted on, I think it was Instagram, might have been Facebook or something about how, I feel like in our house we sort of have this like kid incubator going, which seems to be working really well right now we have a soccer net, so if the kids want to go play soccer, they play soccer. We have our daughter recently mentioned that she was really interested in playing the piano. So my husband put out this huge keyboard that's like a self-teaching keyboard she's been playing and she's been teaching herself to do it and so we sort of have these like little mini modules set up around the house based on things that the kids are interested in and then they kind of just go and do it and we're sort of in awe of what they're able to accomplish. That doesn't actually take a ton of resources. It really just takes a little bit of sort of like organization and setting up stuff. So I encourage people to sort of think of ways that they can do

that for their own kids or even in your own life. If there's things that like coloring books, adult coloring books became so popular recently. Coloring is relaxing, it's creative, you're using your brain. It's interesting. There's a lot of stuff like that and I think, you know, talking to Shannon made me realize like how important that is to give your kids the tools to allow them to drive themselves.