What It’s Like Parenting With AFib

by TRAVIS VAN SLOOTEN

My AFib Secret: How I Kept It From My Kids (but Eventually Told Them)

I was officially diagnosed with atrial fibrillation on Father's Day in 2006. Nice Father's Day gift, right?

At the time I only had one child and she was just two years old. When I had my first ever episode that evening I had no idea what was going on.

I was just enjoying dinner with my wife and daughter and then it hit! My heart was off to the races and I had shortness of breath. I knew immediately something was wrong and so did my wife. Fortunately, my daughter was too young and clueless to pick up on anything — she just kept smiling and munching away at her dinner.

I told my wife my heart was racing and I had shortness of breath. She panicked more than I did and insisted we call 911. I thought that was overkill so I told her to hold off.

About five minutes later, which felt like an eternity, I started to panic so I told her to call 911 but to have them meet me at the front gate of our apartment complex. I didn't want to make a scene by being carted out of the apartment complex in a stretcher!

Looking back, it's funny how vain we can be, even in an emergency. But I also made that request because I didn't want to frighten my daughter. What is she going to think if I'm carried out in a stretcher? I thought that would be too traumatic for her.

With my daughter in the back seat still smiling and clueless as to what was going on, my wife drove me to the front gate entrance of our apartment complex and we waited for the ambulance to arrive. When they did, my wife got out of the car with me but we kept our daughter in the back seat watching a movie.

Again, I didn't want my daughter exposed to any of this so we just kept her occupied in the car. My wife ended up following the ambulance to the hospital.

As a stay-at-home dad I've always had a very strong bond with my daughter, and when my wife came into the ER with her in her hands, I wanted to cry. I was scared I was dying and I would never see my daughter or my wife again.

I resisted the urge to cry and kept up a strong front for both my daughter and my wife. There was no way I was going to let either one of them think anything was seriously wrong with me.

I just smiled and told my daughter I wasn't feeling well so I had to see a doctor. I assured her I would be leaving shortly. She didn't look the least bit worried or concerned.

Fortunately, I was only in the hospital for about four hours that evening. I was eventually electrically cardioverted and sent home.

As far as my daughter was concerned, daddy saw the doctor for his sickness and was all better. I never spoke of the incident again with her and AFib was never talked about.

The AFib Secret Continues

I was extremely fortunate because in the next eight years I only had an episode once a year or two. When I'd have my attacks we'd have a neighbor watch the kids so my wife could drive me to the ER to have an AFib cardioversion.

I would have four cardioversions over the years, and each time my kids would have no idea what was going on.

Because my episodes were so infrequent and I had a simple plan in place (go to the ER and have a cardioversion), AFib was never really a worry or concern. I never felt the need to talk about it with my daughter or my son, who was born a year after I was diagnosed.

There were times I wanted to let them in on my secret, but every time I was going to tell them I changed my mind. How do you explain atrial fibrillation to toddlers when most adults don't even understand what it is?

I didn't want to needlessly worry them. There was also a part of me that didn't want to admit my heart wasn't normal — as soon as you have to sit down with your kids and tell them you have a problem it suddenly becomes real. It was just easier to continue to keep it a secret.

AFib Forces My Hand — I Had to Share My Secret With My Kids

Unfortunately, in 2014 my AFib spiraled out of control. I started having episodes once a month and eventually a couple times a month.

Because my episodes were so frequent my treatment plan changed. It wasn't practical to have a cardioversion for each episode so my doctor prescribed flecainide as a pill-in-the-pocket treatment. This was a godsend because I no longer had to deal with the inconvenience or expense of having to go to the ER — I could just pop my pills and lie down until the episodes passed.

As my AFib rapidly progressed that year, it became apparent an ablation was in my immediate future. It also became apparent I was going to have to let my kids in on my secret.

They were a little older so I had more confidence that they would understand and not worry about their dad, but it still wasn't easy to tell them. I procrastinated for a long time.

I remember during some of my episodes I would quietly pop my pills and excuse myself as I would go lie down. I'd be in bed for the better part of the day and the kids would come in my room and ask me why I was in bed all day.

I'd just smile and tell them I was tired and not feeling well. You have to love the innocence of children. They just accepted my answer and went on their way.

After I started talking to doctors about having an ablation I couldn't keep my secret any longer. I had to tell my kids, no matter how difficult the conversation was going to be — for them or me!

I decided I wasn't going to make a big deal of it. I wasn't going to sit down and have a serious talk with them — that would be too frightening. I had an idea of how to tell them without it being too serious or frightening for them.

How I Confessed to My Kids

I decided I would confess my secret in my car. Conversations in a car while running mindless errands are never

too serious, right?

So one day as we were driving around town I suddenly turned the radio off and told my kids I had something to tell them real quick. They immediately came to attention and waited for me to speak.

I don't remember my exact words but I basically explained to them how a normal heart beats. I even attempted to demonstrate it with one of my hands.

I told them I have something called "AFib" so my heart doesn't work that way sometimes. I said sometimes my heart beats like this as I demonstrated with a quivering action instead of a steady contraction with my fingers.

Their eyes were wide open with amazement but they weren't too concerned. I think they even laughed as they thought it looked funny how my heart beats sometimes.

My daughter asked me if it hurts. My son asked me how it stops. They had a handful of simple questions, which I proceeded to answer as lighthearted as possible.

I also told them I would be going to a "heart doctor" soon that would be fixing my heart so it doesn't do that again (the ablation). They thought that was fascinating too and had a few questions about it.

At the end of our very brief conversation I assured them I was fine and it was nothing they had to worry about. I just wanted them to know. With that I turned the radio back up and it was business as usual.

After that conversation I felt a huge load lifted off my shoulders. I didn't realize what a burden that secret had been. I could now battle my AFib in the open — I didn't have to shield my kids from it anymore.

When I'd have an attack I would simply tell my kids I had to rest because I was in AFib. Their response each time was, "Okay Dad. I hope you feel better soon." It was never a big deal.

My kids have been a part of my living with AFib journey ever since that conversation in the car, but AFib never dominates the conversation as I refuse to let it dominate my life! Of course that has been easy to do since I haven't had any AFib episodes since my ablation in March 2015.

If AFib rears its ugly head again, I will battle it in the open and my kids will be included in the conversation. However, I don't think I'll ever discuss the serious risks of AFib with them until they are older and I'm fully confident they can understand everything.

I've said it a couple times in this article but my guiding principle is to not needlessly worry my kids. They only need to know the seriousness of my condition if it gets really serious. And hopefully it never does!