



Natalie Decker: Driven To Beat Arthritis

Hosts: Rebecca Gillett, MS OTR/L and Julie Eller

Guest Speaker: Natalie Decker, NASCAR driver

There's no holding Natalie Decker back — even the juvenile arthritis that wouldn't let her straighten her arms as a child. She played hockey and danced and she started racing go-karts and then cars before she was 10 years old.

As a teenager, Natalie pursued her passion and now races professionally in the NASCAR Xfinity series. But it hasn't all been a smooth track.

In this episode of Live Yes! With Arthritis Podcast, Natalie shares her inspiring story, which she hopes will help others who live with juvenile arthritis. She tells hosts Rebecca and Julie about coming out of remission in her early 20s, the physical and emotional challenges she's dealt with as a young woman with JA in a demanding career, and how she has found ways to not only survive, but to thrive.

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Episode 39 NATALIE DECKER: Driven to Beat Arthritis

Full transcript

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PODCAST OPEN

Welcome to Live Yes! With Arthritis, from the Arthritis Foundation. You may have arthritis, but it doesn't have you. Here, you'll learn things that can help you improve your life and turn No into Yes. This podcast is for the growing community of people like you who really care about conquering arthritis once and for all. Take a moment to subscribe to, rate and comment on Live Yes! With Arthritis wherever you get your podcasts ... and never miss an episode. Our hosts are arthritis patients Rebecca and Julie, and they are asking the questions you want answers to. Listen in.

Rebecca Gillett:

Welcome to the Live Yes! With Arthritis podcast. I'm Rebecca, an occupational therapist living with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

Julie Eller:

And I'm Julie, a JA patient who's passionate about making sure all patients have a voice.

MUSIC BRIDGE

Rebecca:

Thanks for joining us on this episode of the Live Yes! With Arthritis. We have a special guest today with us, Julie: NASCAR driver, Natalie Decker.

Julie:

We're so excited to have Natalie with us on our podcast today. She is not only an amazing NASCAR driver, but also someone who lives with juvenile arthritis. So, we are just thrilled to have you with us here today. Thank you for joining us, Natalie. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Natalie Decker:

First, thank you so much for having me. I started racing when I was 9 years old, racing cars. And I was born with JA. And I got diagnosed at the age of 2. And by the time I got



into racing, I was 9. I knew a lot about my body and what I could do and what I couldn't do. And I knew I wanted to raise in NASCAR. That was a dream of mine and a goal of mine. And I just made it happen. I kept working hard at it. I never gave up.

And once I was about 18, 19 years old, we started making our way into NASCAR. And now, this year, I've been racing in the Xfinity Series, which is almost the highest level in NASCAR. It goes Cup, Xfinity and Truck. And I've done some truck races. And now I'm Xfinity. And it's just been so much fun.

Julie:

What an incredible accomplishment. Oh my goodness.

Rebecca:

It is so inspiring to watch how far along you've come the last couple years alone and to know that this whole time you are one of us, managing your arthritis every day. Do you remember any of the symptoms you were having as you were growing up? And what that was like?

Natalie:

Yeah. So, my arms were locked. I couldn't fully straighten them. I remember every time I'd go to the doctor, he would get this weird ruler-like measurement thing out and he would measure to see if I was able to straighten my arm any more than the last visit. And that was the thing that bothered me the most, because, you know, I was in dance, I was in hockey, and then I was racing cars and go-karts. And that was a career and a dream that I started at such a young age. I really did not want my arthritis to affect that.

And I was on methotrexate. And the biggest thing that we did for everything was: We would make sure I would take my medication on a certain day, and I would suck it up. I wouldn't care if it made me sick during school or hockey or dance. I did not want to be sick on the weekend from the medicine because that was the time that I'd be racing. So, we'd always time everything out so that I felt the best when I was going to the racetrack.

Rebecca:



Well, you'd need to be able to straighten your arms to do all of the things that you were doing. Oh my God. Was there anything that you remember doing to help improve your movement?

Natalie:

There was nothing that I was doing physically, just the medication was really helping me. And I remember there wasn't much pain. I don't remember much pain when I was younger. But then I went into remission at about 12 years old. So about for 10 years, I was on methotrexate and then went into remission. And I was doing so many things. I was so active. I was playing hockey. I was in dance. I was boxing. Just like training, not actually boxing.

Rebecca:

Yeah.

Natalie:

And I was racing cars. I was working out with trainers. Like every single day for at least three hours every day I was doing something really active and hard on my body. And I remember starting to get really sore, and stiff, and in pain. And I just thought that, "Oh, well, I'm just a teenager. I'm being hard on my body. This is normal." And then it just got worse and worse and worse to the point where I couldn't even get out of bed. I was so exhausted. My hands, my knees, my ankles, everything hurt so bad that I didn't even want to get up and do anything.

And I finally started talking with my parents about it and telling them how I felt. And that's when we found out that I came back out of remission, and I was going to have to go on some kind of medication to help everything and help all my symptoms.

Julie:

That can be such a hard pill to swallow, pardon my pun. Because when you get into that phase... I definitely experienced that when I was a kid, where I would be really, really well in a remission-like state for a couple of months, or maybe even longer than that, and then all of a sudden, that lifestyle I'd become accustomed to when I was feeling really well would start to slip out of my fingers, and my arthritis symptoms came back up.



How did you deal with that other than just chatting with your parents and going through the motions with your provider? How was that for you? And how do you continue navigating through?

Natalie:

There's a lot of things that I don't remember physically wise when I was younger. The thing I remember the most is going to the doctor like every few weeks, getting my blood taken. Always at the doctors. I was there so much to the point I thought I wanted to be a doctor. (laughs)

But once I got older and I was experiencing all of this... There are so many things that I do now to help prepare myself for the days that I know I need to feel my best. Racing is just the easiest example I can give because I'm doing it all the time. So, if I'm at a racetrack, that's my job, and I'm there, and I have to sit down with my engineer and talk with him and go over all of our information for that day — I'm gonna pick a spot where I feel comfortable, and I can sit and relax and do it with the little amount of energy possible so I can save my energy.

I do that with all things, from grocery shopping, to cleaning the house, to taking my dog for a walk. I really try to save my energy and do certain things just so different, so I can save my energy for the bigger, harder parts of the day. And I learned that this past two years. That's really important, because you don't have a lot of energy. And you can spend it really fast. And all of a sudden, it's noon. And you're tired and ready for bed, and you're like, "Crap, I shouldn't have done that. I should have saved my energy more." (laughs)

Rebecca:

Yeah. It's planning ahead. I would imagine that, how busy and crazy your life is, you really do have to think about how the little things affect your energy at the end of the day and before a big event.

Natalie:

Yeah. And it's so important. Like sleep is so important. And I always tell everyone, my sponsors, my team... They always love to go out to dinner and hang out and do team bonding things the night before a race. And it's like 8:30. And I'm like, "I have to be in bed by 8:00. Because if you want me to wake up the same time you're waking up and be a hundred percent, I need to start winding down, relaxing, maybe putting ice or



heat or whatever on my joints." And I really need to start taking care of my body so I'm ready for the next day. And a lot of people don't understand that.

Julie:

Right.

Natalie:

So, I always explain to them and give them examples of why I have to do it. And then they start understanding, the more they're around me. (laughs)

Julie:

Yeah. Arthritis and any chronic illness, really, is about making those tough choices more than it is about anything else. When somebody asks me, "Oh, how has your lifestyle changed?" I always say, "Oh God, I'm really good at making big, scary decisions." Because you're always making these choices. You're always putting your body first. Or putting your sleep first. And so you find yourself maybe growing up rather quickly.

Natalie:

Yes. Oh my goodness. I love that you said that. Because I feel like that is so true. Especially when I was going to school with all my peers. I just felt like I was a light year ahead of them maturity wise. Because I was already dealing with so many things and having to make decisions and having to put my health first all the time and always having these doctor's appointments. And I really felt like I had a taste of the real world very soon in my life with having my autoimmune disease.

Rebecca:

Every juvenile arthritis kid that I meet, and young adult, they always have an old soul because of just what the two of you said. You had to grow up so fast and deal with big, real-life decisions and manage heavy things at such a young age, yet the resilience and the energy that I feel when I talk to anybody that has grown up with arthritis is inspiring to me.

Julie:



We have T-shirts at our Juvenile Arthritis Conference, and that JIA families across the country have, that say, "Kids get arthritis, too." Because there's this misperception that arthritis is just a disease for maybe folks who are more elderly or for grandparents and so on.

And I remember teaching kids on the playground, saying, "You know, the osteoarthritis that your grandma has, that makes it hard to do things? That's the same thing that I have. I have that, too." It's not just a grandma's disease, and it's certainly not just a kid's disease either. But I think by virtue of having arthritis so early on, a lot of us have that more mature soul, that more mature personality of living a life that requires that kind of decision and responsibility and so on so early.

Rebecca:

I wonder if you can talk about that transition, as you got older and into your teens, of having your parents manage your care to you taking control and managing your care. What was that journey like?

Natalie:

Oh, wow. That was really difficult, actually. It was scary. Because I grew up that whole time period from when I was 2, all the way to 16, 17, 18 years old. My parents always at the doctors' visits with me. They were always helping me make decisions. And I always had them there every step of the way. And when it transitioned to me moving out, a lot of things happened. My autoimmune disease affected a lot of my body to where I was getting a lot of procedures done and surgeries. I got my gallbladder out. My eyes started having effects, and I stated to wear glasses.

All these major things started happening as soon as I was all on my own. And that was very scary. And I was definitely a little shy at first, and it was hard for me to right away say what I want, exactly how I feel and stand up for myself. But as I got put in more situations and just started feeling worse and worse and worse, and I just was like, "OK, I'm done with that. I'm going to stand up for myself. I'm going to tell him exactly how I feel, what I want, what I need."

And that's when I started finding really, really good doctors. And now I have an amazing rheumatologist. I have a really good cardiologist and all these doctors that I need. Because arthritis doesn't just affect my joints; it affects my organs and my eyes. Your heart. I got my gallbladder taken out. Like all of these things.



So, once I started standing up for myself, it was just a huge difference. And I'm really glad that I had my parents all through growing up, because then I could look back and see like, OK, what did they do? How did they help me when we were at the doctors? And what were the questions they asked? And that was really, really neat that I could look back on that.

Julie:

It is no small feat when you are becoming the owner of your care and transitioning into that phase. And I just remember feeling so incredibly grateful to my parents for how well they managed my care and also completely intimidated because I did not realize the breadth and depth that went into navigating this experience. Right? My parents protected me from a lot of it. And when it became my turn to be the owner of those things, gosh, it was really overwhelming in many cases.

I realized that the more that I shared my story, personally, not just with my doctors or with my insurers or any of my care team... The more I shared my story with my peers and with my community and so on, the better I became at being my care advocate as well. And I think that's one of the things I really admire about you, Natalie, is that you live very visibly with your arthritis despite any of the fears or concerns you might have about that maybe impacting your career or becoming something other than a rallying cry, right?

Natalie:

I was always so scared to talk about it. Ever since I was really little, I was scared to tell my friends about it, or my teachers, or my dance teacher, or my hockey coach. I was always very nervous to talk about it because I didn't want them to look at me different or treat me different and have it affect what was happening in the classroom or on the hockey rink ice.

And I was very nervous to even bring it up to my team when I was racing in NASCAR, even though it was so important for me to talk about it and be open with them so that they knew the struggles I was going through. If I needed their help getting out of the car after a race, for example. I could race for four hours straight. And by the time the race is over, sitting in that same position, sometimes my hips and my knees would lock up, and I wouldn't be able to physically get myself out of the car all by myself, and I would need their help. So, I had to be really open with them. That was hard.



When I brought it to the public, and I was on social media about it, doing interviews about it, talking about it on live TV, when I'm racing... That was so scary for me to think about. And I remember the day we filmed a video: I was at Road America here in Wisconsin racing. And I had a camera crew come in and we filmed, and I talked about my story growing up with arthritis. It was very short, not a lot of detail, but just sharing my story so I could get it out there and tell everybody.

As soon as I did that, it really felt like there was a weight lifted off my shoulders. And then from there, I just brought everyone in on the whole journey, everything that I was going through. And I just wanted to help whoever was following or watching, who was maybe going through something similar. And I always tell everyone when I'm talking about everything that I'm going through, I always mention: You never know what people are going through at home or health wise. Never judge anybody. Never look at them any differently, because you just never know what they're going through. You've got to just treat everyone with kindness.

Rebecca:

It's so true. Arthritis can be such an invisible disease. It's cathartic when you do share it publicly with people, or maybe there's somebody in your circle that doesn't know about your diagnosis, and when you do share it, I think we've probably all experienced that... when you finally say it out loud. We always talk about having a chronic disease, it's like going through the stages of grief. And when you get to that point of acceptance, then you can share. I think it helps you to take control and feel empowered by what you can and can't do to control your disease. Right?

Natalie:

Exactly.

Julie:

Right?

Julie:

You have this continuum, I like to think about, where you have complete invisibility and then hyper-visibility. And sometimes, as a podcast host on Live Yes! With Arthritis, I feel a little bit hyper-visible in my patient experience. And Natalie, I would imagine you feel a little bit hyper-visible sometimes in showcasing your story and being available for people



to see, "Oh wow. She has arthritis. And she's a successful race car driver. And she's accomplished her dreams. And she's done this great stuff."

Whether that's being very open and honest and making arthritis a visible part of your day to day, or keeping it more private and letting it be something that you share with your inner circle of people, or the people who are most empathetic to you. I think that that is a really personal choice. And there's no right answer to figuring out what works for each person. But I do know, recognizing that that is a choice to live kind of outward facing with your arthritis, it is a choice to keep it private. That has empowered me. That has given me a sense of control over this thing that can be so uncontrollable: your arthritis.

PROMO:

The Arthritis Foundation tests and certifies products that make life easier for people with arthritis and other physical limitations. Ease of Use-certified products are easy to use by everyone. Learn more at <https://www.arthritis.org/partnership/ease-of-use>.

Julie:

I know it's been inspiring to people in our community when we hear your story and see how high you've climbed. How has your kind of self-advocacy impacted the way your colleagues and other driver interact with you?

Natalie:

With racing, you kind of move around a lot. So, you get a lot of new people you work with every year. I have to teach them and explain to them, so they know what I'm going through, what it feels like, and that it doesn't just always affect my joints. And I always need to let them know that my health comes first. My doctor's appointments get scheduled throughout the week before anything else.

So, if they have these meetings set up or if they need me to be somewhere, I always tell them that I need to schedule my doctor's appointments and my health first. I'm a race car driver, and a lot of our work is done at racetracks or race shops, and it is very different. A lot of people don't know this, but the racing side of things also has a big part of business.

So, there is a lot of, you know, Zoom calls, and emails, and presentations, and sitting at a desk. And sometimes those days are what are the most difficult. Because those days, I need to rest and prepare myself for the time I'm going to be out doing meet and



greet, and being on my feet all day, and being at the racetrack, and being very physically active. OK, these are the hours I'm going to be working, and this is what we need to get done, and this is how I'm going to do it so I can save the most energy possible.

Rebecca:

Are there any symptoms that you struggle with the most with your arthritis? Or are you well managed right now?

Natalie:

I have some crazy symptoms. Some days I'll wake up and I will not be able to walk down my stairs to let the dogs out, to go to the bathroom. I will have most of my pain in my knees, and they'll be so swollen where I can't bend them or even straighten them. They're kind of stuck, like slightly bent. And those days are hard because then you feel like you're not accomplishing anything, because you're in so much pain and you can't do anything. You just have to sit there and wait. Wait it out and manage it as best possible.

So those days are the most difficult, especially because I live such an active life. And I'm always going, going, going. So, those days, that really slows me down, and I can't do much. It's mentally hard for me to sit there through those days.

Julie:

Yeah. The mental health component to it is, I think, one of the ones that's least discussed, but one of the ones that is most prevalent across all patient experiences. Right? And I think on the days when my body is not cooperating with me and not cooperating with what my mind wants to do, I have just the most anxiety that that could be my every day. And that kind of fear, that kind of anxiety, those kind of depressive thoughts, can be really overwhelming. Natalie, what do you do when you're feeling kind of some of the anxiety of it? How do you manage that?

Natalie:

I love this. I started working with a sports specialist or sports psychologist, whatever... You can call him many names. And he has RA as well.

Rebecca:



Wow.

Natalie:

We've really connected, a really strong level of showing strength and working through our days. He works with a lot of athletes, and doctors, and so many people. He taught me an equation that I live by now. And it has changed my life. It changed my life first with my health.

And the equation is A plus B equals R. A: everything you can control. You can control what time you go to bed. You can control if you're going to stretch that morning or meditate or put ice on your knees to help you through the rest of the day. Those are the things you can control. And many other things.

And then B stands for things you can't control. Like if you have a flareup, or if something else starts hurting, or if all of a sudden your autoimmune disease starts affecting your eyes. There's so many things you can't control. And then R is the result, the end result of the day or of your journey through that week.

When I first met with him, I was focusing so hard on my result. Like trying to get into remission or whatever my result was. And I was always focusing on B, the things I can't control, the flareups happening, and all of the bad news that I was getting that I can't control. I was focused so hard on those moments and those things to where I didn't have enough room or time to focus on everything I could control.

You always 100% need to focus on A. You need to do your best with what you have. So, every day you wake up, if you can only go so far, do so much, do it to the best ability you have. And that's all you've got that day. And the results are going to be what the results are going to be. As long as you always focus on A, focus on yourself and your best self, B's going to be B. There's going to be and can't be factors. There's going to be all those things you can't control. They're going to happen no matter what. So, you don't even think about them.

And then at the end of the day, the results are going to be what it's going to be, and it will be the best it can be if you always focus and do your best on A, everything you control. I started living by that, and it has changed my life; it has changed my stress levels and anxiety; and I've just become so much happier living every day to day doing my day-to-day stuff.

Rebecca:



I love that. A plus B equals R. That's awesome.

Julie:

Yeah. And I think it's a helpful tool that can reframe how you think. It's not necessarily what you do. I mean, it can be as you start to live by the equation. Right? But certainly how you think... Did I do the things that I can control today? Did I did them well? Check, check, check. Yes. Yes. Yes. All right. Well, the B factors, they're coming at me from every direction, and I can't take responsibility for them because they are outside of what my arms can hold. And being results-focused, and thinking about what you did to invest in those results, is much, much, much more healthy than thinking about all of the things that took away from that result. Or just so outside of your realm of control. I love that, Natalie. That's phenomenal.

Rebecca:

It can be hard for people with any chronic disease to not focus on the B, right? The B factor. For me, I know it took me almost two years to realize that there was an A. There were things that I could control because I didn't get that patient education, you know? Oh, there's things I can do. Like, I can use a different tool so that I'm not putting more stress on my joints. I didn't know all of those things. And so, I think that this is a great way of looking at it.

And I'm going to guess that a lot of our listeners right now, hearing you say that, went: "Aha. Yeah. Actually, that is a different way for me to think."

Natalie:

Yes.

Rebecca:

Thank you for sharing that.

Natalie:

It has changed my life, so I hope it can change other people's lives.

PROMO:



Get tips to help you take control of arthritis and put your mind at ease with the Arthritis Foundation's free e-books. They're packed with trusted information from the experts on all kinds of topics. See the full menu at <https://www.arthritis.org/liveyes/expert-advice>.

Rebecca:

People don't really understand all that's involved in the sport that you're in. And so, I know you talk a lot about physical activity being so important to you to be able to race. Because I think a lot of people don't think about that. Like the stamina you have to endure to do that many laps during a race and everything you need to do to be able to race. Can you tell us what kinds of physical activity that you do to keep yourself strong and keep your body healthy?

Natalie:

Well, my physical activity and working out and training for a race is going to be completely different than a race car driver that doesn't have RA or any other thing that's gonna stop them from doing certain exercises. But why we have to train, and train our bodies physically for the race, is because... Let's say it's 80 degrees out at the racetrack. Well, it's going to be 30 to 40 degrees hotter inside the car. Also, you're wearing a helmet, you're wearing all the fireproof gear. So, it gets very, very hot.

Rebecca:

Wow.

Natalie:

And then on top of that, you're in the car for up to three or four hours. And to be in that heat for that long, with not even having to focus, is difficult. Then on top of that, you need to be at your best focus and always on point, on game. That takes a lot of energy, and that takes a lot of effort to be able to always be in the zone and focus in that heat.

And then on top of that, if someone wasn't physically fit and they were racing, and let's say it's the last 30 laps, well, their judgment... and their decisions they're making, or their reaction time might be a little bit slower, because they're going to be thinking about the pain they're in, or how tired they are. And that's really easy to do, especially if it's been a long day and it's really hot out, and you start thinking about other things. And



you stop thinking about what you need to focus on: hitting your marks and making the best lap you can make every lap.

So, the things I really do to train is very simple. I do a lot of stretching. I think it's very important to be flexible. Because if you were to get into a wreck, I think it's important that you're flexible enough to where your body can move around and you won't hurt yourself. So that's really important in my training.

But I do a lot of body weight things. I do a lot of like riding a bike or an elliptical. I don't go for long runs. I can't do that. A lot of drivers will run marathons. They'll run outside. They'll do a lot of like CrossFit type workouts. Very intense, high intensity, running back and forth, jumping up and down.

It's hard for me to do squats. My knees don't work very well. So, I have to do different exercises to make sure my legs stay strong. I do a lot of yoga and a lot of like strength yoga and a lot of body weight. Because, like I said, it's hard for me to jump around and do all sorts of things.

My workout looks a lot different, but I'm just as strong as the driver next to me that's racing. I can last just as long as he can in the car and not fall out of the seat when you get really tired and you start falling out of the seat.

Julie:

(laughs) I love that. And I think that's important. I think it's easy to get bogged down in the peer pressure of doing activities the way that everybody else does them, simply because they're doing them that way. And giving yourself permission to make a modification or to find a more appropriate exercise for you, I think that that's really, really empowering and inspiring.

And, Natalie, I know from the athletic side of it, it's absolutely impressive, but even for a lot of people with arthritis, the physicality of driving can actually be very difficult for folks. Do you have any key tips or tricks that you do when you're experiencing car fatigue that you might be able to offer our listeners in terms of their driving?

Natalie:

Yes. It's everyday driving. Oh, I hate long car rides. Because that is hard on your body. Relaxing your shoulders, relaxing and not being tense and being comfortable in the car is really important. And sometimes that's hard, especially if you're like on the highway or on a long road trip, or there's a lot of traffic, it's easy to tense up. Just relax, and relax



your body. Because even when you're tense, it's just putting so much stress on everything.

I remember to just relax my shoulders, my legs, stop flexing my muscles. And I just have to keep reminding myself to do that. And I notice a big difference when... Especially if I'm even not driving and I'm in the passenger seat and we're going for a long road trip, I always make sure I'm relaxing my neck and my legs or straightening my knee and bending it and making sure that I'm giving it some movement so it doesn't hurt after a few hours.

Julie:

I love that.

Rebecca:

Yeah. It's actually really ironic that you hate long car rides, yet you race for like four hours straight.

Natalie:

(laughs) Yeah. True. That is odd. (laughs)

Rebecca:

Well, I know for me, like if I have a big event, or there's something I'm looking forward to that I've been working so hard on, and I can't even fathom at your level, but post-event, I'm a mess. I'll flare, I hurt, like my body comes down from that adrenaline high. I wonder, does that affect you?

Natalie:

Yes. I'm so glad you brought that up. It is so important, especially for any athlete or anything you're doing when you get a lot of adrenaline or you're doing a lot on your body, is to recover. And to recover as fast as possible is so important. And so many drivers can go back-to-back races. And I've done back-to-back races, too. But it's when we... let's say we raced at Daytona, the opening race, the first race of the year, and the next day is the worst day. It is so hard, it's hard to move. My joints hurt. I'm stiff. I'm sore everywhere. I'm dehydrated. I'm nauseous. I'm exhausted.



And it will usually last for a couple of days. I won't be back to a hundred percent of my capability of doing something or have my full energy. Even though I might start feeling better, my body isn't exactly back to a hundred percent. And the other drivers, they don't even need that full day to recover.

They recover by the afternoon, as soon as they're fully hydrated, and they're ready to go. So, I always have to make sure I extra prepare myself. And I hydrate extra. Right after the race, I start hydrating. Even if I'm so exhausted and I don't want to eat, and then I just want to go right to bed. I make sure I drink enough water, I eat. I'll even sometimes force myself to shower that night, so when I wake up, I can take my time in the morning and really relax.

And it's so important for me to have a really good nighttime routine every night. It doesn't matter what's going on that next day, that nighttime routine... I take longer getting ready for bed than I do getting ready in the morning. (laughter)

I spend all that time getting ready for bed, when I have a little bit extra energy, it's a little bit easier. It's relaxing. When I wake up that next day, I have less to do to spend my energy on getting ready.

Julie:

That's a good practical tip for anybody.

Rebecca:

Totally.

Julie:

I love that. Love that. And you're right. I find when I take a shower, wash my hair and I wake up with dry hair in the morning, I have so much more energy to get into my workday or get through the morning errands or do whatever it is I need to do. Because I don't have to go through the slog of convincing myself to go and get ready in full. I love that advice. (laughs)

Rebecca:

We've talked about this, like self-care Sundays. Like, no, it should be, especially because sleep is so important for us, that you have this awesome routine before you go to bed.



And like you said, I never really thought about it, but that's true, it does make my morning easier when I have that great bedtime routine. So, I love that.

Julie:

And just one more thing you can add to your factor A of things you can control.

Rebecca:

Exactly. Yeah.

Natalie:

Self-care is so important. It will change your attitude. It'll change the way you feel about yourself. I really believe in self-care, and like skin care and just really taking care of your body because you only have the one body. It's all you have.

Julie:

Natalie, you've been chock full of great words of wisdom today. You've been able to offer our listeners so many really good tips, not just for the professional race car drivers that are listening, but for everybody who's tuning in today.

Especially for our young adults and our kids, and teens, or even parents of people with JA, do you have any specific advice that you would offer to those families who are experiencing arthritis for the first time? And what words of wisdom might you share?

Natalie:

If you're going through something hard medically, or with school, or with your career, all of the above, this is so important. And my number one advice I always tell everyone is: You need to have a really good support system around you. Because you're going to have so many days where you just want to give up, you want to be done. And it's just so hard to get back up and keep going. And they'll be there to remind you.

If it's your grandparents, or your aunt, or your uncle, cousin, mom and dad, brother, friend, whoever it is: Lean on them and always have them there because there's going to be days where you really need them. I know if I didn't have my support system, my medical history would be a lot different. I know it would be a lot different career-wise or just everyday life. When I'm so exhausted and I'm in pain and I can't do anything, my mom's there to tell me like, "Relax, just go lay down. Don't feel guilty about it." And that



always makes me feel so much better when I hear it from my mom or someone that I know really cares about me.

Rebecca:

That's great advice. It really is. You're so inspiring to so many young girls. I know you're inspiring to our arthritis community. What does that feel like to you to be... You are like the next Danica Patrick of NASCAR, right? And everybody knows that. You are on the rise, a female in a male-dominated sport. So many things that you are doing and working so hard for can be such an inspiration to any kid out there, especially the kids in our arthritis community. How does that feel to you?

Natalie:

Well... Thank you. (laughs then gets teary) Sorry.

Julie:

You take your time. You got her, Rebecca. (laughs)

Natalie:

So I just want to make a difference in the world. And really thank you for saying that. I just want to make a difference in the kids' lives, whatever career they're going for, or if it's... 'Cause they have RA or an autoimmune disease. I just want to make a difference in their life and share my story so hopefully they can see what I'm doing and hopefully it helps them with their journey. I just want to make a difference. So, that's all. And seriously, thank you for saying all of those things. (laughs)

Rebecca:

Well, you are. I didn't know you were going to make me cry today, Natalie! (laughter)

Natalie:

You started it!

Rebecca:

I know. Sorry. (laughter) Good answer, Natalie.

Julie:



It's gonna go around for each of us.

Rebecca:

It's not easy, right? Every day isn't easy for you. And hearing you talk about, "Yeah, I just raced 40 laps, and I placed where I wanted to be, but I can't move for the next couple of days." You still keep going and you're still out there, and you're getting to the cup. I know it. Thank you for being such an inspiration to all women and to all people with arthritis.

Natalie:

Thank You.

Julie:

That's a cool thing to see someone like you doing what you're doing. So, for our conversation today, if you were going to leave our listeners with three key takeaways... When they think about you, Natalie, or when they think about this conversation, what are those top three takeaways you'd like them to have?

Natalie:

I really I want everyone to remember $A + B = R$. Because that will help you when you're having to make a hard decision or just throughout everyday life. And then the support system. Definitely, the support system, I think that's so important. That will help you go so far in life. Third one: I'll feel guilty a lot of times when I need to rest or I'm in pain and I can't keep up. I don't like it when I feel that way. And I want people to know that it's OK when you need to rest or you can't keep up with someone else. So, to not feel guilty. 'Cause I do that all the time. I need to remind myself all the time that it's OK, and I shouldn't feel guilty. That's not right. I shouldn't have to feel like that.

Julie:

I think that's perfect. Giving yourself permission to be who you are and to take up the space that you need is huge. And each of your words of wisdom, each of your pieces of guidance, were so hugely important for our community and for our conversation today.



PROMO:

Check out the Arthritis Foundation's new app, called Vim, to help people with arthritis gain power over their pain. The app features expert educational content, a goal and activity tracker and opportunities to connect with others. It'll help you set attainable goals and achieve small wins that add up to big victories. Download the app at <https://www.arthritis.org/vim>, spelled V-I-M.

Rebecca:

I know you are trying out Vim. I'm just curious: What do you think?

Natalie:

Yes! I've been meditating now. It helps me remind myself to meditate every day, and I really like that. Because then I can just breathe and relax and go into my head. And I like thinking back to myself when I was younger, when I was like struggling or not having a good experience with a doctor or a medication. And I like going back and telling myself, like if I was talking to my younger self, telling myself that everything's going to be OK, you're strong, everything's going to work out.

Going back and doing that, it just feels really good for some reason, pretending I'm talking to my younger self and like seeing how far I've come. And then I have a couple of other goals, like physical goals, like stretching and all of that. But I like that you can cheer on other people. That's cool.

Rebecca:

That's my favorite part, too. Yeah.

Julie:

Natalie, just thank you so much for joining us and for being the inspiration that you are. We appreciate you.

Natalie:

Thank you so much for having me. This was so much fun. (laughs)

Rebecca:

Yeah. Thank you, Natalie Decker, for being on our podcast. And I just want all our listeners, if you aren't following Natalie, you need to follow Natalie in her career, and



watch her get to that finish line. Because we know you're going to get where you want to be. So, thank you so much.

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