

David White, 44, is an electrician. His wife, Sally, 41, works in child protection. On Christmas Day, 1998, Sally lost her mother to brain cancer. Eight years later, she was diagnosed with a brain tumour herself. They live on Melbourne's northern outskirts with their sons, Josh, 13, and Ben, 11.

2 of us

David &
Sally White



David: It was New Year's Eve, the end of 2006. A perfect day. We were down at the family beach house at Phillip Island. Sally was reading a book on the beach, I was playing cricket with the kids. After bowling for a bit I plonked myself next to Sally and asked, "How's the book?" She turned to look at me and suddenly started shaking violently. She began frothing at the mouth; her body went all contorted. It was terrible.

I didn't know what was going on. I began screaming at the kids and at people up the beach to help, call an ambulance. When Sally eventually came out of the fit – it probably lasted only 30 seconds – she didn't know who I was, who her kids were. I thought she'd had a stroke.

She spent New Year's Eve in hospital. The fit turned out to be a grand mal [epileptic] seizure. After an MRI scan, a doctor came into her room to tell us, "There's no easy way to tell you this, but you have a brain tumour."

Sally just went, "Wow!" We didn't see it coming. She was just 38. A biopsy confirmed it was a [less aggressive] grade 2 tumour, but that meant little to us then. Our experience of brain tumours was her mother's diagnosis, and she'd lasted four months. Sally had been very close to her mother and she'd always found it hard to accept that she had died so young, at 62.

I met Sally when she was 18, a first-year uni student. We were out with friends and I instantly fell in love. She was vivacious, intelligent, and her strength of character shone even then. She initially thought I was

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being strongly committed to our faith and our families.

After the diagnosis, Sally underwent surgery to remove as much of the tumour as possible without paralysing her. We were told it could only buy her time; the tumour would become more aggressive within five to 10 years. Sally wasn't satisfied with that and decided to seek a second opinion. It was a brave thing to do, switching neurosurgeons. She's shown that sort of courage throughout her career – it takes a special sort of person to go into people's houses and remove kids from unsafe situations. She sought out Charlie Teo [the Sydney brain surgeon]. Charlie told us that further surgery would give Sally a 15 per cent chance of being cured.

Charlie removed a golfball-sized tumour in mid-2008. For a while Sally lost the use of her left hand and her speech slurred, which it still does slightly when she's

tired or stressed. Some people indicate they have seen a change in her personality, but that's just Sally learning to say no to people so she can concentrate on her own wellbeing for a change.

Throughout 2009 we were travelling beautifully. For almost 18 months we dared think we might be among the 15 per cent who are cured. Four-monthly scans showed no change. Sal wrote a book about her experience (*Three Quotes From a Plumber*) to help other people be brave enough to seek a second opinion. Then came the last scan. It showed the tumour was growing again. We're going to need more treatment.

Sally: David always tries to see the positive in everything, but he'd be the first to tell you his optimism has been tested. His father was diagnosed with cancer the year before my mum was. It became a four-year battle, and David believed for three of those years his father would win. They were incredibly close. David served his apprenticeship with his father. They worked together, they went to church together and they played golf every Saturday since David was 17.

When I first met David, I took it very slowly. He was funny, open and able to hold a conversation, but where we connected right away was on a spiritual level. He was at a Baptist church, which was a lot more evangelical than [the one] I had grown up in – lots of singing and clapping and waving. We had a lot of debates about my views on expression of faith but, as it turned out, I became very committed to that church as well.

We no longer attend a church but our faith remains strong. What's been challenging for me has been accepting that just because you have faith doesn't mean that everything will work out fine. Certainly, early on after my mother's passing, I did not appreciate people saying to me, "She's in a better place." I believe God has given me the strength to deal with our situations, to find meaning and purpose in them, but He certainly hasn't created miracles to protect me from them.

David has been the person who has given me permission to cry. I've always been "competency-based, solution-focused" – it goes with the job. I like to be positive and strong and to be there for other people. It has taken me some time to see that it's okay for me to rely on other people to be strong, and to appreciate less defensively David's good reasons for questioning whether I'm looking after myself properly. He's become my handbrake, if you like. My safest place is in his arms. There have been lots of times when I've cried and cried and he's said, "Okay, you need to sleep now. This will all look different in the morning."

At the same time, David wears his heart on his sleeve. He cries a lot. Fortunately, he has a number of close male friends he speaks honestly with. That has helped him. But he's at his best when he can do something practical. He likes to feel he's contributing to action and to purpose, whether that involves making juices to boost my immune system or cooking healthy meals or expediting some other means of wellbeing. He basically formed Blackwood 8 [a charity that raises funds for cancer research] with a bunch of friends out of a sense of frustration that he couldn't do more to support me.

David's a source of what I call sparkling moments, the small things that brighten a day if you choose to let them. It might be one of David's brain tumour jokes, like the time he asked the neurosurgeon to remove the bit that prevented me from barracking for Collingwood. The boys loved that one.

As much as possible, we try not to go down the track of the "what ifs". We want to be honest with the kids without giving them adult worries about my prognosis and the like. It's important for us to live in the now. Of course, I do ask myself some "what ifs". I know how hard it was to lose my mum – and I was 30. But I also know the kids are going to be all right. David's a great father. I am confident that if I die, he will be brilliant. **GW**