Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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Surviving Cancer

Making the Transition Back to Work

While significant medical and social progress has extended and enhanced the lives of millions of cancer survivors, more good news is that research has shown that cancer survivors who continue to work are as productive on the job as other workers.[1]

In addition, most employers appear to be highly sensitive and accommodating to the needs of employees who are cancer survivors. In a 2006 survey of cancer survivors, three out of five reported receiving employer and co-worker support, such as help with work or random acts of kindness. Survivors also reported very low incidences of negative reactions from employers and coworkers.[2]

Easing the Transition

With 44 percent of newly diagnosed cancer patients of working age in 2014, these statistics can be reassuring to cancer survivors transitioning back into the workplace.[3] Most cancer survivors who are physically able to work do go back to their jobs. Returning to work can help them feel they are getting back to the life they had before being diagnosed.

However, returning to work can cause mixed emotions: relief, fear, hope and awkwardness. Even if you are sure you're ready to return, you may wonder whether you'll encounter skepticism or support. Here are some suggestions for smoothing the transition from cancer patient back to valued employee.

Rebuilding Confidence

Once you are cleared to return to work, evaluate your readiness to work. Are you ready to come back full-time or part-time? Consider medications you are on and their possible side effects. Will they impair your ability to drive to work or to stay alert during long meetings?

Once you've decided whether you are returning full-time or part-time, propose a schedule and see if it fits your employer's needs and then prepare to follow it.

Look at your workstation. Does it need to be redesigned or fitted with equipment such as back support or other devices to make you more comfortable? Should you attend workshops or seminars to refresh your skills? Or attend industry events to keep your knowledge up-to-date?

It is also important to re-establish confidence in yourself and in your job abilities. One way is to feel psychologically up to speed. If you're feeling down or not entirely up to the task, seek one-on-one counseling from a social worker or a therapist, or join a support group of other cancer patients returning to work.[4]

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Travel Tips When Back on the Job

If you travel for work, the good news is that you can do so comfortably and safely by taking proper precautions and using common sense:[7]

- Have your doctor's information on you at all times. Consider wearing a medical bracelet. Take along any recent prescriptions signed by your doctor.
- Carry all medications with you, on your person, and bring extra in case of delays. Keep them in their original containers.
- Get emergency numbers for each city you will be visiting and the numbers of the American consulate or embassy, if traveling to other countries.
- Investigate your health insurance. It may not cover your costs outside of the United States. If it doesn't, you should purchase travel health insurance.
- If traveling by plane, get up and walk around at least once every hour while on the plane to increase your circulation.
- Keep hydrated, especially when on a plane, in a dry hotel room in an arid climate. Do not drink alcohol during airline flights.
- Eating well-balanced meals can be tricky when traveling. Bring along meal-replacement snacks (e.g., peanut-butter, crackers and energy bars).
- As soon as you return from your trip, visit your doctor. Set up this appointment before you go away so you will have peace of mind while you travel.

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Managing Fatigue

Some cancer survivors report that they feel tired or worn out upon returning to their jobs. In fact, fatigue is one of the most common complaints during the first year of recovery. People can feel very frustrated when fatigue lasts longer than they think it should and when it gets in the way of their normal routine. They may also worry that their coworkers will get upset with them if they continue to show signs of fatigue. Here are some ways to deal with it:[5]

- Talk with your doctor or nurse about what may be causing your fatigue and how to reduce it. Ask about medicines and/or specialists who could help you.
- Plan your day to be most active when you feel most alert and energetic.
- Save your energy by changing how you do things (e.g., sit on a stool when presenting instead of standing).
- Let others help you. If no one offers, ask for what you need. Co-workers might be willing to help but may not know what to do.
- Join a support group. Talking about your fatigue with others who have the same problem may help you find new ways to cope.

Coworkers' Response

The response of coworkers after your cancer treatment may differ. Some may be a huge source of support, while others may be a source of anger or frustration. Some people mean well, but may not know the right thing to say. Others may not want to deal with your cancer at all. Some people may not understand about cancer and your ability to perform while recovering from treatment.[6]

There is no right way to deal with others in this situation but it helps to think ahead about what you'll say when you're back on the job. Some cancer survivors don't want to focus on their cancer or be linked in people's minds with the disease. Others are very open about it, speaking frankly with their boss or other workers to air concerns, correct wrong ideas and decide how to work together.

The best approach is the one that feels right to you. If you see your return to work as a major step forward in your recovery, others will too.

How To Take Care of Yourself

When you return to work, you may find that your work-related attitudes and priorities have changed or you're not quite back to normal emotionally or physically. Here are some strategies that may help:[8]

Set Professional Boundaries: Learn how to set boundaries so you can decline requests like staying late for non-essential tasks or being given new projects. Say "no" in a way that is still professional and team oriented.

Reduce Workplace Stress: Take advantage of stress-reduction programs offered by most cancer treatment centers.

Delegate: Review your workload to determine what needs your personal attention and what can be given to others. Guidance and direction can be provided without being on-site.

Write Down Priorities: List your most important tasks then focus on completing those first. When you aren't feeling well, reread your priorities and do just what absolutely has to be done on your list.

Focus on the Familiar: If you decide to look for a new position, return to your old position for a while before interviewing for a different job. Regaining your confidence as an employee in a familiar environment can be most helpful.

Breathe: Take a few moments to breathe deeply. Getting more oxygen into your system will slow your heart rate, decrease blood pressure and relieve stress.

Exercise: Physical activity is one of the most effective ways to combat stress. Head to the gym for a yoga class or treadmill time. Take short breaks to stretch or do simple exercises in your desk chair. Or try meditation.

Listen to Music: It's easier to relax when your favorite song is playing. Load your iPod with music you love or pop CDs into your computer and listen quietly.

Head Outside: Sunlight and fresh air can help you de-stress. Eat lunch outside, take strolls during breaks or make your next one-on-one meeting a walk-and-talk.

Laugh: Laughter can reduce the physical symptoms of stress by increasing the flow of oxygen throughout your body and releasing feel-good endorphins in the brain.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Under the BeWell section, click on "Cancer" to access videos, articles, news, and links to valuable resources. For additional support, you can find a clinician by clicking on the Find a Provider tool.

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1 National Cancer Institute,http://www.journeyforward.org/document/life-after-cancer-treatment-social-and-work-relationships. Accessed February 2016.

2 National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/cancer-survival-toolbox/special-topics/, Cancer Survival Toolbox® Special Topics. Accessed February 2016.

3 Cancer + Careers, http://www.cancerandcareers.org/en. Accessed February 2016.

4 Ibid, Cancer + Careers, http://www.cancerandcareers.org/en/at-work/back-to-work-after-cancer/Your-Mindset. Accessed February 2016.

5 Ibid, National Cancer Institute.

6 Ibid, National Cancer Institute.

7 Ibid, Cancer + Careers. Accessed February 2016.

8 Ibid, Cancer + Careers. Accessed February 2016.

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