

An Honest Account - Working with Cancer – Adele King

I first contemplated writing this article back in spring of this year. My mind brimming with thoughts and ideas, I couldn't wait to get started. However, in reality, it's taken much longer. My body and mind have been through so much these past months. I've now made peace with the fact that it's OK to be kind to yourself and that things may take a little longer.

This all began in June 2018, when I was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer - breast, lymph and bones. I'll never forget the feeling of profound shock hearing those words. Up to that point I thought I was invincible. I was now facing emotions I hadn't experienced before. *Will I be able to cope financially?* I was in the process of starting my own business at the time I was diagnosed. *Who will care for me?* Having lost both parents to cancer and recently divorced, there came a heavy weight from fear of isolation.

Add the mental challenge of there potentially being no specific end to treatment as my diagnosis was palliative not curative created a cocktail of emotions as potent as some of the cancer drugs which are now part of my life.

What I knew, was that maintaining a sense of purpose and perspective was going to be critical. Critical for my mental health, which is intrinsically linked to my sense of well-being and therefore recovery. I recognised that in order to have the energy and the will to continue through the tough times, I'd have to consciously put a strategy in place.

So, I went ahead with launching my own business in June 2018, Transcendence Coaching Ltd. Supporting Corporates and individuals in the context of Change. Macmillan estimate around 750,000 people are working with cancer in the UK. A number that will only increase. Being self-employed whilst living with cancer comes with its own challenges, and also opportunities. I'm now in a position to share 3 things that have really worked for me.

1. Strengthening my Support Network

There's nothing that loved ones want more than to be able to help in some way. I changed my mindset to one that was more open and able to accept unconditional love. This meant that I now welcomed gifts from people wanting to help with the day to day things like cooking, cleaning and lifts to appointments, instead of attempting to do everything myself in a misguided sense that doing stuff equals normality. The precious extra energy I gained was critical for recovery and allowing focus for building my business.

I also made a conscious decision to speak very openly and freely about my cancer journey. I appreciate this is entirely a personal choice. This helped me engage with my Corporate clients as I explained my diagnosis, my ongoing treatment and potential side effects. Many people had also been touched by

cancer directly or indirectly and were happy to have an open conversation and often share their own experiences. It also meant there was no surprise to see me completely bald from the effects of chemo.

This ability to be vulnerable and more open and honest with myself about how to accept support or ask for help made a huge difference to my ability to work effectively.

2. Maintaining my Boundaries

Boundaries have been a challenging area for me, and were, long before my diagnosis. Specifically, how I maintain clarity on my own needs without automatically prioritising the needs of others. With a desire to help everyone else, you can sometimes forget to help yourself.

From a professional perspective, I worked hard at creating a more phased and organic approach to ramping up. I consciously managed how I was scheduling clients, where I was taking breaks and allowing time for recovery. I accepted it was fine to reschedule if this was required. I've had to reschedule clients when it wasn't safe to be more than 5 metres away from the toilet after chemo. People are understanding.

From a personal perspective I have had similar issues to manage. You can imagine how many people want to meet up, see how I am and check in, all with very positive intent. Initially I found myself not wanting to disappoint or let people down, expending energy updating and meeting people. This can be tiring, particularly during heavy chemo cycles where I experienced symptoms such as extreme fatigue, pain and low mood.

What I've learned now is the importance of 'fitting my own oxygen mask'. I've learned to articulate more clearly "no" or "not right now". I'm more flexible in my planning for what I choose to take on, but more structured in planning into my diary personal recovery time which may be spent alone, as well as time away on holiday to recuperate.

3. Working Smarter not Harder

One of the biggest factors as to why I chose to set up my business at this time was a deep desire for freedom and balance. The ability to build my business organically at my own pace and having the freedom to work more flexibly gave me peace of mind with the numerous hospital appointments, scans and treatments I now juggle. However, fatigue determined whether I was able to work effectively or not. This meant changing the way I thought about working to allow time for balance.

My approach to this was finding ways to do more in less time. I now work in shorter bursts with recovery in between. I allocate regular free days, generally after hospital treatment days. I regularly review my workload, outsource, and let

go of what isn't important. I have also reviewed the way I work and how I can manage and minimize travel time. Skype and Zoom are great options for meetings. This means less driving or public transport when fatigued. This enables me to focus energy in the right areas. Actively listening to my body and allowing flexibility helps me to embrace working smarter not harder.

Whether you work or not through your cancer journey is such a personal choice based on your unique set of circumstances. However, for me, working whilst navigating my cancer journey has given me a profound sense of purpose.

It still remains a daily challenge to stay attuned to my needs and ensure I keep living the elements I describe in this article. By being flexible, reframing what success looks like and celebrating those small wins I look to the future with hope and happiness. I'm off now for an afternoon nap!