

Getting back to work

Like many, my cancer diagnosis came out of the blue. I'd just celebrated my 50th birthday with a trip to New York and then a month later I had my first mammogram. After that my world changed.

I had no symptoms and didn't feel ill but found myself going through a series of tests and was told I had an early form of breast cancer and would need a mastectomy. It was hoped that surgery was all I would need.

But 15th August 2017 is a day my husband and I will never forget. It was the day I received the pathology results from the surgery. My consultant broke the news – "I'm afraid the results are not good". A high grade tumour had been found and there was cancer in a lymph node as well. I was going to need chemotherapy, a drug called Herceptin for a year, further surgery to remove my lymph nodes, and then radiotherapy. I was looking at another nine months of treatment. I felt numb, couldn't stop crying and was so scared.

I have worked as a freelance writer, editor and communications consultant for more than 25 years and at the time of my diagnosis I was looking to change how I worked. I wanted to move away from working for big corporate companies and focus more on writing and editing for smaller organisations and individuals. I had just produced two brochures for a client and was working on copy for a website.

But after my diagnosis all I could think about was cancer. I found it difficult to read, and writing seemed an impossible task. I was fortunate that my husband worked so we still had an income.

I struggled through treatment. The chemo was tough, and I had a bad reaction to one drug which meant I had to change from chemo every three weeks to once a week. I was tired and scared and ached all over, and my poor husband had to put up with my steroid highs and lows. I lost my hair from the chemo treatment and I found that hard to deal with – I hated my bald head and kept it hidden either under scarfs or hats or a wig.

It took a few months before I could focus on reading. My sister kindly brought me books to tempt me back and then she bought me a book of writing prompts. They were simple exercises to get me thinking again.

By May 2018, I was coming to the end of my treatment. Luckily no more cancer had been found in my other lymph nodes, and my radiotherapy went well. But I was left with fatigue so bad that at times I just had to go to bed. Working was very hard. I had managed a few freelance jobs since I was diagnosed – some simple proof reading and editing but nothing too taxing. I struggled to concentrate and my confidence was very low.

The following year I had some further reconstruction surgery which I desperately wanted so I could feel more comfortable in my clothes. I started applying for some part-time jobs, realising that full-time work was not going to be possible as the fatigue was still there. I spent ages on applications never hearing anything back. My confidence went so trying to bring in new freelance business was tough and I didn't know what to do.

Then I saw a tweet from Working with Cancer offering work coaching. I jumped at the chance. I was nervous starting out, but my job coach Lainey Mitchell was fantastic. Over three coaching sessions she worked on boosting my confidence and suggested practical tips on how to look for jobs and helped me

put some structure back into my days. I had been overwhelmed about trying to find new work – I'd been through cancer which had left its mark and now I was trying to find work during a pandemic.

But Lainey helped me to focus and set me tasks to do after each coaching session which made me also think about balancing work and life. I'm pleased to say that I've just completed a project for a new client who I found through a friend. It was daunting starting on something new and I was nervous, but without the boost I'd gained from my work coaching I wouldn't have been able to do it.

It's great to know there are organisations like Working with Cancer that can support and help you. Cancer was such a traumatic experience for me that has left both physical and mental scars. But I'm starting to feel that I'm getting back on track, and while these are difficult times and there will be a few more bumps along the road, my confidence is returning.