

Lockdown for some – life on hold for others

Just a year ago I was only part way through my treatment for oesophageal cancer. I'd had chemotherapy followed by major surgery and still more chemotherapy and some radiotherapy were to follow. I'd put life on hold and hadn't really thought about how or when I might fully return to work. Like so many others, the prospect of getting through the treatment, seeing my family, friends and colleagues kept me going. But I harboured more fundamental concerns about whether I'd get through it at all and whether the cancer was still lurking stealthily in my system. After 18 months of successful treatment I eventually allowed myself to look forward to a holiday or a couple of short breaks – a kind of reward for being an obedient patient, perhaps? After returning to work I made a modest attempt to look forward to a life 'after' cancer.

That was then, this is now. The COVID-19 pandemic has been unremittingly bad for so many families. The fear of illness and loss has been more commonly and viscerally felt by so many than we ever imagined. For people undergoing cancer treatment – including several friends – I know that the baseline anxiety that everyone has about the treatment and the uncertainty over the outcomes is being amplified many times. Being immunosuppressed is not great place to be at the best of times, and now it can feel like you have a target on your back. Stories of cancer treatment being delayed or postponed because of the pandemic are terrifying for those for whom urgency is crucial. Selfishly, I am relieved to have completed my treatment in good time. But the curse of the cancer survivor is that you just don't know how much more of a healthy life you may have left, and the prospect of several months of 'lockdown' where, like everyone else, a large 'Pause' button has been pressed on life is especially ironic and frustrating for those of us who count every post-treatment second with close family and friends as precious.

On the upside, I'd already got quite proficient at working remotely, so 'homeworking' and the disciplines it requires are no strangers to me. Similarly, the prospect of falling ill or even dying from something other than cancer is possible (on a good day) to greet with an ironic shrug of resignation. Having peered at length into the abyss already, I've gone through many of the psychological adjustment processes about mortality and have remained sanguine about the prospects for my long-term survival anyway. Don't get me wrong – things have been going well and I was allowing myself the luxury of thinking more than 6 months ahead.

Having said that, my optimistic plan to make the very best of the new few months and years, just in case, has been hamstrung by the pandemic. I'm lucky that I have a job which can be done remotely if necessary, and it has been a great source of fulfilment and distraction since I've been back. The great irony is that I'm now well enough to engage fully in the things that make life worthwhile and, as for many others, the door has now been slammed shut until the autumn or beyond.

At a time when employers are being urged to pay extra attention to the physical and emotional needs of employees who are furloughed or who are [working from home](#), those of us with what are euphemistically called 'pre-existing' conditions may also have specific needs for reassurance and support. For many managers the fact that you are a 'cancer survivor' can sometimes mean you can be safely put in the 'cured & coping' category. No need to worry about us, the worst is over.

Well, while its mostly very nice to be thought of as just another employee again and to be welcomed back to work as if everything were normal, the sudden appearance of a global pandemic which seeks out those with compromised immune systems can elevate anxiety levels somewhat. It's probably as good a time as any to think about accessing the very fine coaching [capabilities](#) of the Working With Cancer team. Of course, line managers have a lot of other things to worry about in these extraordinary times, but I urge them not to forget those for whom one nightmare threatens just as another has ended.