

AN OPTIMISTIC 'TAKE' ON COVID-19, CANCER & SOLITUDE

BY WWC AMBASSADOR, STEPHEN BEVAN



Workers across the UK are being encouraged to return to their workplaces as the COVID-19 'lockdown' eases and concerns over the economic fortunes of City centres grow. Of course, the logistics of remobilising millions of people who have been working from home since March are far from straightforward.

Just travelling to work safely on public transport is a concern for many. Getting 5,500 workers back into the 52 floors of London's 'Cheese Grater' office building (and out again) when only two people are allowed in a lift at a time is emblematic of the big headaches for office block landlords and their occupants. Then there is the challenge of those workers who are clinically 'vulnerable' themselves or anxious about being exposed to the virus for the sake of a loved one's health.

Working age cancer patients and cancer survivors represent a large group of people for whom the pandemic has added yet another layer of distress. We know that many patients have had either a diagnosis or treatment delayed, increasing their already elevated levels of anxiety. Even for survivors like myself, there can be a haunting feeling that – despite having come through treatment – not only could our disease return but exposure to the virus might prove to be a traumatic experience.

For us, and many others with underlying conditions which dramatically increase the risks of a poor outcome if we catch COVID-19, there is an expectation that our employers will take special care when considering the circumstances under which we would be comfortable sharing an office with colleagues again. In many ways, working at home has been a great benefit, especially for those of us lucky enough to do jobs where face-to-face meetings are not essential. But for others some kind of phased or gradual return to the workplace may be necessary, and it is here that employers will need to take special steps to make sure that vulnerable workers feel safe.

The team at Working With Cancer are real experts at helping employees and managers think through the range of issues that need to be addressed when planning a return to work, including during COVID-19. Advice and counselling can make a strong contribution to the wellbeing of those struggling with the work-related challenges of the pandemic. Now is a great time to seek help and get additional support.

It's really important here to recognise that the mental health of much of the workforce has been challenged in ways not seen in peace time. My [own research](#) looking at working life during 'lockdown' has shown that emotional wellbeing was under real pressure very early on and, despite some improvements, it remains fragile for many young people, those with complex caring responsibilities, those with underlying health conditions like cancer and those who feel insecure either at work or in their accommodation.

There is growing [evidence](#) that counselling in workplaces, if implemented well, can be very beneficial for workers with complex emotional challenges. We have discovered, for example, that some introverts have found 'lockdown' more bearable than some extroverts, who can have stronger needs for social connectivity. We have also found that the mental health of people working from home is better if they get more frequent, supportive and empathetic contact with their immediate boss. So, isolation has had its upsides and downsides.

My guess is that, for many who are living with chronic illnesses and disabilities, the isolation of 'lockdown' has been distinctly double-edged, however. For some it has provided a 'safe space' to work and to contribute to something worthwhile. For others, it can only emphasise the solitude of being ill. A dear friend of mine - a cancer survivor for whom each six-monthly CT scan is also a source of tremendous trepidation - said to me recently that, at the end of the day (and despite the love, goodwill and support we get from others) living with cancer is ultimately a solitary experience. It's hard to refute this, I guess, even if we manage to connect meaningfully with others who have the same cancer, the same treatments and similar symptoms. We are all different and we all draw upon a different set of resources. Yet this realisation need not be cause for despair. I'm lucky to have a great support network both at home and at work, and I try to use the feeling of existential solitude my friend mentioned to help me 'process' what has happened to me during my diagnosis and treatment and to ready myself for whatever comes next. This can be a scary process because it means acknowledging things about yourself and the future which you'd rather not face. But it has been, for me at least, an enlightening experience and one which has given me greater resolve. Lots of people have helped me to reach this point, though few of them have realised it. For many others of course, counselling can be one of the other ways that they can make sense of their 'journey' so far and how they can face the next steps. For those who want or need to keep working this type of support can be crucial, and we need more employers to recognise that offering ongoing support during return to work and beyond can make a big difference.

I'm sure that the turbulence and uncertainty of COVID-19 has prompted many others to engage in at least some self-reflection over the last few months. For some it has prompted a reappraisal of how and where they want to live and work. For others it has made them reassess and refresh their inner reserves of resilience and resourcefulness. For those experiencing solitude, for whatever reason, special care and support is needed. Work can be a lifeline here, and with concerns over a second wave of COVID-19 and another rise in job losses once the 'furlough' scheme ends, the more employers can do to offer guidance, support and reassurance the more likely that workers living with chronic health conditions will get a chance to feel 'normal' and to resist the more damaging consequences of solitude and disconnection.