

LIVING AND WORKING WITH SECONDARY CANCER; MY STORY BY MAGGIE STEPHENS



There's no good time to be told that you have secondary breast cancer, but just before Christmas in the midst of a Covid-19 lockdown definitely wouldn't have been my first choice. My diagnosis story will be familiar – I found a lump, went to the doctor, had biopsies and was initially diagnosed with primary breast cancer. A month later that diagnosis changed to secondary breast cancer when a CT scan showed it had spread to my lung. Since then, I've been taking drugs to contain and control the cancer. It's still only a few months since my diagnosis, so I'm currently awaiting my first scan since starting the treatment. Fingers crossed.

Breaking the news to family members was hard enough (there's plenty of great support online about how to tell children, but much less about telling your 87-year-old mother who's been isolated for nine months). But as someone who will go to any lengths to avoid conflict, giving bad news or doing anything that upsets other people, telling my wider circle of friends, colleagues and contacts has been a very tough challenge.

I'm self-employed, and incredibly lucky to work in a way that is flexible and easy to manage alongside my cancer. I'm a business copywriter, editor and presenter usually based at home. I sit down to work all day and – as long as the work gets done for clients – am mostly in control of my own hours and deadlines.

I'm also incredibly fortunate to have a long-standing and very friendly bunch of clients. But I still went through many emotional cartwheels when it came to telling them. Would those loyal clients suddenly decide I was too high-risk? Would they worry that I ought to be sipping cocktails on a beach in the Maldives rather than writing about pensions policy (chance would be a fine thing...)? How would I market myself to new clients? Should I be looking for new clients at all? Should I cut down my workload? How should I present myself professionally on social media?

Given that it was so close to Christmas, I decided that I wouldn't discuss it with any of my work clients or my friends until the New Year. Everyone (including me) was having a bad enough time with lockdowns, sickness and bereavements without any more miserable news. And after all, the cancer wasn't going to go anywhere.

Just before New Year, I caught Covid. Fortunately, although pretty grim, it was treatable at home and only caused short-term disruption to my treatment. Plus, it took my mind off the cancer for a couple of weeks.

That might sound flippant – but in fact it was incredibly significant. I'd intended to talk to clients and friends in the first week or so of January, but I was still so wrapped up in the effects of Covid when everyone returned to work, that I couldn't even begin to think about

the emotional effort involved, or even all the talking involved in sharing the news with everyone.

January became February, and still no-one outside my family knew. With the exception of having to reschedule a couple of meetings because of a late-running hospital appointment, it caused no disruption to anything workwise; no-one would be any the wiser. Did I even NEED to tell anyone?

February almost became March. I didn't want to keep this to myself any more. Apart from anything else, I needed to stop avoiding conversations about Covid vaccinations so that I didn't have to risk explaining why I'd got mine before anyone else my age.

Plus, lockdown had proved a convenient smoke-screen workwise – I didn't need to worry about having the energy to get through a full day of meetings with clients, or chair a 500-person event, because there weren't any. By March, there was just the faintest hope that those sorts of days might eventually be back on the cards.

Finally, I plucked up the courage to speak to my biggest client, and I was so relieved when I did. After discussing it with the director that I work with most closely, I explained to the team I work with closely using our instant messaging platform (my choice). Ironically, being able to share the news in this way was one of the advantages of lockdown – we all use this platform day-in-day-out to swap business and social messages, and it proved to be a great way to be open with everyone at once. I would never have been able to manage if I'd had to share this news in person, in the equivalent of a team meeting, but this worked very well. I know that approach wouldn't work in all organisations – but it was perfect in this instance, given the great culture and team spirit that particular business has and the support I'd already got from the director.

It felt like a great weight off my mind and I no longer had to 'hide' it from anyone. I always like to look at things positively and get as much from life as I can – family, friends, work and everything else. But inevitably there are days when my positive thoughts feel like small pebbles on a huge beach of grief. Knowing that I can just say 'sorry, I'm not at my best today' is so important.

I'm fortunate that I've been well to date (Covid aside) and able to continue to live my regular life as before my diagnosis. There will be days and more when that's not the case – but for the time being, it's business as usual. And I like it that way.