

CANCER AND COACHING: LESSONS IN SELF-KINDNESS AND LEARNING TO EMBRACE THE UNKNOWN

BY CLAIRE SLADE

As a 40 year old, who has just retired from her GP partnership, you would be forgiven for thinking I might not be the best advert for coaching through Working With Cancer. However, you couldn't be further from the truth.

In November 2019, at the end of a year of investigations for anaemia, I was diagnosed with bowel cancer. I was a 39 year old GP partner, married, with 3 young children. Life had, until that point, been extremely full, busy, and fun, but I had the work-life balance thing sussed. I...was...superwoman.

The diagnosis floored me.

In truth I'm still struggling to come to terms with what happened. The physical recovery was the easy part. That much is clear to see. The emotional recovery has been, and continues to be, far more complex.

Being a doctor has, I think, made it even more challenging. I've blogged about my cancer experience during this last year (thisgphadbowelcancer.com). Writing, for me, is cathartic, and it helps me try to make some sense of it all, but I've come to realise that doctor-patients, in particular, have a totally warped sense of logic. After years of being told how capable we are, backed up by the stream of exams we've passed in order to qualify in our chosen specialty, we end up buying into the superhuman mentality that has been fed to us since before medical school. This mentality serves us well professionally – striving for excellence in all that we do – however it is totally destructive if, and when, cancer strikes. All of a sudden there is a total power shift. We go from being supremely in control of pretty much every facet of life, to being almost completely dependent on others – surgeons, oncologists, friends, family... and it's uncomfortable being in such unfamiliar territory.

Because we don't see ourselves as patients, we also struggle to accept what we're told about recovery. Because we've "excelled" professionally, we believe we'll "excel" at this recovery business. My perceptions of self-performance have been so far removed from reality in terms of my non-physical cancer recovery, and this for me has been one of the hardest challenges I've encountered.

It's been a rough old ride and little has gone smoothly, but 7 months or so post diagnosis, with surgery behind me and having undergone a somewhat abortive attempt at chemotherapy, I felt like I was ready to start contemplating a return to work. Counselling was, and still is, ongoing, to help me deal with the emotional head mess that comes with the cancer diagnosis, but work has always been a massive part of who I am, and it felt like the time was right to start thinking about returning. I am lucky to say I love being a GP, and I was very keen, although apprehensive, to return to doing what I loved.

I knew that thanks to cancer, and subsequently COVID, both I, **and** my GP surgery workplace, had changed considerably over those 7+ months. This was never going to be like

a return after maternity leave – where although I might have changed, the workplace remains largely the same. I was returning to a world of remote consultations, where seeing a patient face to face, in the flesh, was the exception and not the rule. I would be returning very much on the backfoot, having been watching from the sidelines, while my colleagues had had the ‘benefit’ of working through COVID for the previous 4 months – now battle-hardened veterans.

Despite no obvious outward difference in my appearance (you don’t lose your hair with bowel cancer chemo), there was no escaping the fact that I too had changed significantly in the intervening months. I’d been fighting my own war, even if it was less obvious from the outside. I worried about how I would be perceived by my colleagues. About whether I would be able to live up to their expectations, let alone my own. Would staff still come to me with issues or would they shy away, worried about burdening me? Would I be a burden to my partners? How would people talk to me? Should I talk about what had happened? Should I not? As senior partner, would such disclosure to staff be appropriate? If I didn’t talk about it, would the cancer become the “elephant in the room”? How would my absence be explained to well-meaning patients? So many questions running through my mind.

Liz O’ Riordan, a doctor who had set up a Whatsapp group for Doctors with cancer, had recommended I make contact with Working With Cancer, to help me navigate the process of returning to work, and this recommendation was seconded by a number of other members of the group, who had found coaching sessions really helpful. Until this time, I had never heard of the organisation before, but I had a look on the website and the bios of the people working with them, and was impressed with the experience they brought, and what they appeared to offer.

Given that I was still undergoing counselling, I was mindful that embarking on coaching might be emotional overload, but there is a clear distinction – coaching is *not* counselling, and for me, one very much complemented the other.

By the time I had my first session, I had already talked through what I thought was a fairly sensible looking phased return with my practice manager and partners, including a period of shadowing at the start. I would initially go back one day a week, and then plan on increasing a session every couple of weeks. Sarah Dawson, my coach, helped me navigate those initial weeks of my return – they were far less overwhelming than I had feared and it was good to be back in the saddle again. Conversations, both with staff and patients, were easier than expected and I felt like I was regaining some control. Sarah had helped me anticipate, and therefore overcome, many of the potential hurdles.

All was going swimmingly.

What I never expected was the development of crippling insomnia. Work, for me, wasn’t the problem, but it got to the point where I wasn’t safe to work, let alone drive the 20 miles there and back, due to the lack of sleep.

Everything at that point seemed to unravel and I found myself back off work. What the coaching really helped me with at this point, was the recognition that this wasn’t failure,

and specifically wasn't *my* failure. There were a host of other factors at play that needed addressing, and were being addressed – including importantly, underlying depression, of which the insomnia was symptomatic. I just needed more time.

I was in a fortunate position to have locum insurance which meant that since diagnosis, I had continued to be paid and the practice could benefit from the ability to fund a locum doctor in my absence. It didn't match the shortfall of my not being there but certainly made my absence easier to deal with. I knew that this policy was due end in November – a year following my diagnosis, and that I needed to address this. It helped hugely talking to Sarah during this time, knowing that she had an understanding of the workings of doctor employment. She understood the various arrangements, especially the self-employed nature of GP partnerships and the ins and outs of partnership agreements. To be honest it was a huge relief knowing that I didn't have to explain this in great detail. Sarah helped me shape the conversations that I had with work in a way that gave me a sense of control. I have mourned the loss of control this last year so giving me this was so vitally important.

One other crucial thing happened during this time and that was a discussion with Sarah about the difference between my expectations of my recovery and the reality. I was still of the misguided belief (“superwoman”, “those timescales don't apply to me”, warped doctor-patient logic in full flow) that I would be able to pick up from where I left off and be back to “normal” after a further 6 weeks phased return.

Sarah asked me how I would feel contemplating a return over 6 months rather than 6 weeks. I remember being horrified to even think that it might take me that long. But we looked at the evidence: what I had endured over the last year, how my previous phased return had gone, the likely outcome of going back too quickly again, and the inevitable impact that would have not just on me, but on my partners and the practice as well. It was a painful truth, but I needed to hear it, and once it had sunk in, it completely reframed my attitude towards work. Accepting this reality made me focus far more on me and what it would take to achieve a sustained successful return.

Both in coaching and in counselling, there had been a lot of talk about self-kindness – as doctors we are terrible in administering this form of medicine – but it is so vitally important. An integral part of my recovery has been to try and be more kind to myself. I'm by no means an expert but I am slowly improving. I think reframing my approach to my phased return was a huge step forwards in terms of self-kindness.

My partners came to the conclusion that they were unable to accommodate my proposal for a longer phased return – COVID and my absence have taken a huge toll on them all this year – and as a result I have, as of last month, retired from my partnership. While I grieve the loss of work and the investment I made over 7 years as partner there, I can see, thanks to coaching, that this wasn't the only thing that defined me as a person, and I can focus on a future of possibility rather than the potential negativity of being in a workplace that couldn't adequately support me.

It might be easy to review the situation and think “well, what good was coaching if you lost your job?”. I look back over the sessions I've had, and see where I am now, mentally,

compared to where I was when I started out, and I certainly view this as an entirely positive experience. The aim was always for me to be happily and successfully back at work. That meant me being realistic about my expectations of my own performance and how I perceived others' expectations of me, and this has been a hugely important step.

Despite this turn of events, Sarah has kept me focused on what I *can* do, rather than what I *can't*, and has already helped me in terms of exploring some of the options and avenues that lie ahead.

As a result of coaching, I am already far more realistic, generally, in my goal setting and realise the importance of, if not saying "no", perhaps saying, "not just yet". My main focus for now, is to crack on sorting the head mess out, but these are all steps in the right direction.

I might not be ready to return to the workplace just yet, but I feel empowered, thanks to the coaching, in my approach to my work, whenever, and whatever that may be, in a way that I have never done before.