Article Series Mental Health

Getting Back to Work After Cancer Treatment

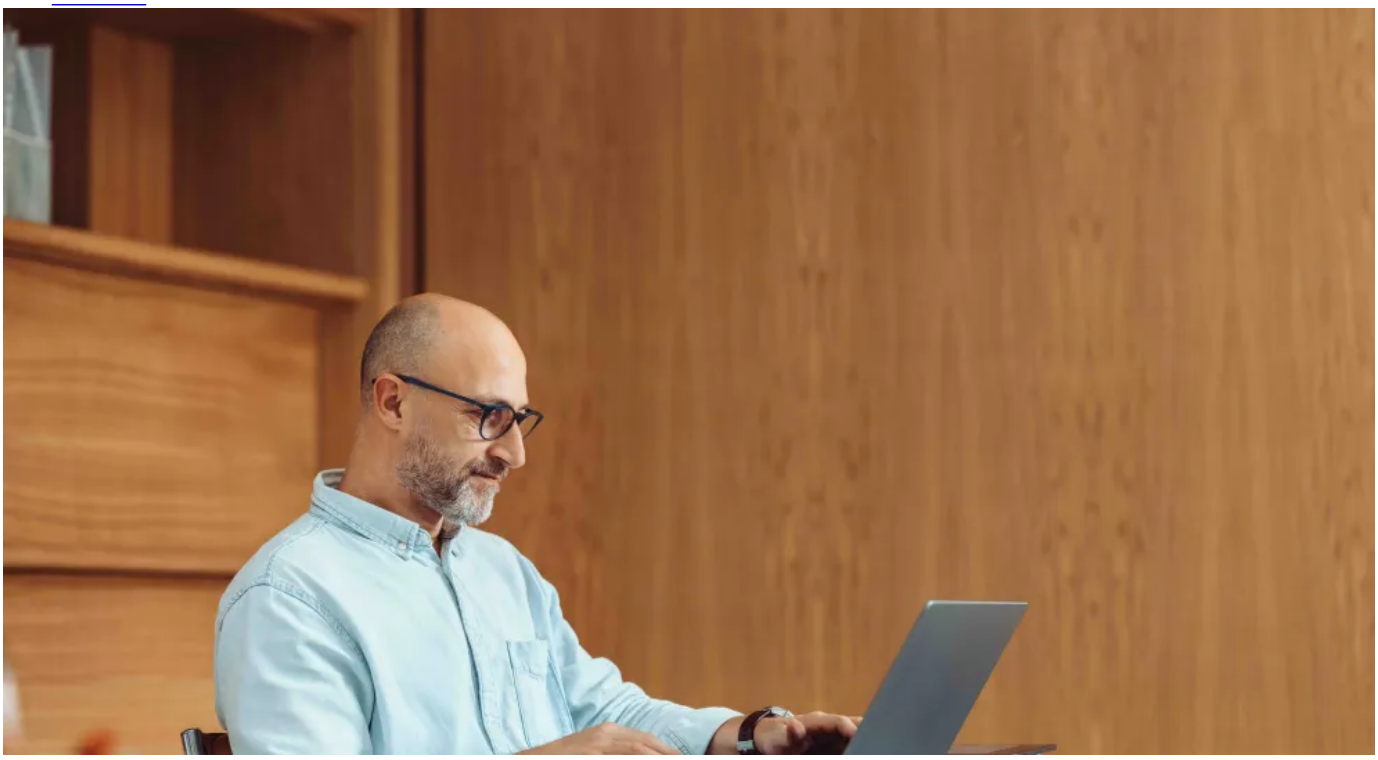
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Cancer and its treatment may affect many areas of your life, including your work. If you've taken time off during treatment, you might feel anxious about reconnecting with your colleagues. Or you might wonder whether lingering side effects, such as fatigue, may affect your ability to do your job.

At the same time, returning to work is an important step in your cancer journey and recovery. Being back at your job may lift your spirits, enhance your self-esteem, and restore social connections that may have been lost during therapy. Returning to

work can also serve as a reminder that your life is not defined by cancer.

In fact, research suggests that people who return to work after cancer treatment may experience better mental health than those who don’t.

But returning to work after a cancer diagnosis can bring emotional and logistical challenges. It’s important to talk to your care team about whether you're physically and mentally ready to take on your job responsibilities. Getting medical clearance helps to prepare you for return for work.

It’s normal to be concerned about how your cancer journey may affect your professional relationships. Note that any personal medical information you give your supervisor is confidential and can’t be shared without your permission. If you need accommodations, such as flexible working areas or remote work, consider meeting with your supervisor or Human Resources (HR) to discuss how they can support you.

It’s important to know that federal laws exist to protect you during your illness. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers to provide “reasonable” accommodations for workers with disabilities, and some cancer treatments and side effects may qualify. The Family and Medical Leave Act allows workers to have up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for cancer or other serious illnesses without the risk of losing their job.

Here are seven **Microsteps** to consider taking when you go back to work: As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Keeping a notebook handy to write down tasks and reminders.
Your treatment may have affected your thinking, memory or concentration. This is sometimes called “chemo fog” or “chemo brain,” which can be a side effect of chemotherapy. It may help to write things down in advance and have notes on hand to help you remember what you want to say or do.

Setting an alarm to remind you of important meetings, deadlines and appointments.
Even under the best of circumstances, it’s easy to lose track of time at work. Setting up systems to keep you on time will help you remember where you’re supposed to

be and when.

Pacing yourself to prevent fatigue.
Taking breaks when you need them, asking for reduced hours to start, or working from home are ways to stave off fatigue. Listen to your body and respect your limits.

Practicing relaxation techniques, such as meditation, mindfulness or deep breathing to cope with stress in the moment.
You can practice these in a quiet place in the office, on a lunch break or at home. Check out our Reset series for relaxation exercises.

Deciding in advance what you will and won't discuss with co-workers.
Think about what co-workers could ask and rehearse what you might say. It's okay to tell them "I'm not ready to talk about my cancer yet," or "I'm tired of talking about my cancer – let's talk about something else." Your answers are whatever feel right to you.

Arranging work-friendly follow-ups with your care team.
Follow-up appointments are essential after cancer treatment. Be sure to talk to the scheduling team about arranging appointments that are least disruptive to your job, such as during lunch breaks or after work.

Joining a support group to get tips on getting back to work after treatment.
Even though you may be getting support from family and friends, it also may help to connect with a support group and talk to other people with cancer who have returned to work.

Being kind to yourself.
As you prepare to go back, listen to your body and your care team. Ease into it if you need to take your time. Remember: the "job" that matters most is taking care of yourself.

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