

Thriving... at Work

The challenge

When diagnosed with a brain tumor, one of the common questions many have is, “Can and will I be able to work?” Although the ability to return to work depends on the needs and situation of the specific individual, many people with cancer, including brain tumors, are returning to, and/or staying at, work.

Today, cancer treatments are more specific with a greater focus on preserving function. There are more survivors than ever before. However, as individuals survive longer, evidence suggests that not only the tumor, but the treatment itself, can alter mood, memory, attention, the ability to plan, to organize and to multitask. Because these skills are required for most jobs, limitations in these abilities can make work a challenge.

This article was written to help those with brain tumors realize that many survivors are in the same boat. The challenges faced when returning to work and maintaining ability to work can be many. As a clinical psychologist with a specialty in medical psychology, I have helped many with various medical problems return and stay at work. I have also conducted years of research on the topic and wanted to share some information that I hope will help you with this important aspect of quality of life.

My experience

I personally was diagnosed with an anaplastic astrocytoma, and have been through surgery, radiation, and a year of chemotherapy. Like some, I wanted to work throughout this experience I found that it was a good distraction for me. Working also provided me with another major source of support -- my coworkers -- and a form of “on the job rehabilitation.” I kept on with most of my work tasks, and the repetition in performing these tasks helped me adjust to many of my limitations. Work provided an opportunity for me to practice using my memory and attention skills. This type of “work rehabilitation” is a common form of treatment for many types of injured workers. It was very useful, and important, to me during this phase of cancer care.



What does the research tell us?

How likely are we to return to work?

If a cancer survivor is employed at the time of the diagnosis, then the rate of return to work varies from 30% to 100% in cancers such as testicular cancer, Hodgkin’s diseases, and “mixed” diagnoses, including brain tumors. These results were obtained among individuals who were followed 3-9 years post treatment. Very promising.

What are the challenges we face?

Not everyone experiences problems staying in their job or returning to the work force. But amongst those who do, reported concerns vary widely. An unsympathetic employer, employer resistance to accommodating fatigue, use of all sick time and vacation time, job suspension during recurrences, inability to get a promotion, inability to change jobs, difficulty obtaining insurance, or supervisor difficulties (e.g., lack of support) are common challenges. There are also a number of cognitive and emotional consequences of the illness and/or its treatment that may affect your work.

Brain function: Thinking and feeling

In addition to those challenges, there are a number of cognitive and emotional consequences of the illness and/or its treatment that may affect your work. But just as we talked about above, not everyone will experience these problems. Being aware of them can help you evaluate the pattern and level of challenges you may have, and detail specific strategies to work around these challenges. It may also help to communicate these concerns to a healthcare professional experienced in survivorship issues. If that is not possible, talk with someone trained in health-related problems at work, such as an occupational physician or nurse.

Over the past decade, there have been studies of cancer patients of all types who have undergone chemotherapy, radiation, or both. These patients have reported challenges with short-term memory, the memory you need to work out a problem, concentration, and the ability to plan and perform activities. Related to these changes is the ability to efficiently problem-solve, make decisions, and do a number of tasks at the same time (referred to as “multitasking”). These are abilities that are very important for many workers in today’s workforce.

Challenges remembering things told to you (verbal memory), and responding in a much slower manner than you once did, have also been related to the use of chemotherapy. Although, these results are not exclusively based on brain tumor patients, there are clear effects of chemotherapy on the abilities that we need for work. Let’s take a closer look at what is known about brain tumor patients and cognitive and emotional changes.

Brain tumor patients have many of the same challenges we’ve been describing. You may experience difficulty maintaining sustained attention. That is, you may find that your attention wanders while you are on the phone. You may move from one task to another without really finishing the one you started. You may notice that the time it now takes to understand something written or understand the details of a task that needs to be completed is more difficult and takes a bit more time. Difficulty controlling mood is also often reported. For example, you might find yourself more impatient or less inhibited in terms of saying just what is on your mind. We should also not forget that stress at work could contribute to these problems and make the situation worse.



What can we do about these challenges? These changes in memory, organization, and planning can be very subtle. They can creep up on you unexpectedly—especially when you are trying to do a few things at the same time. These problems can often come and go on the same day, or you may find that some days you are able to focus better than others. As they say, you are living with a new sense of “normal.” While you need to adjust to some of this, there are things you can try to see if they make a difference in your day.

Tell them at work?

One of the first work-related issues you will need to confront is what to tell others. Should they be told nothing, a little, a lot, or the whole story? I was very open with the decision to tell all. I found that most were understanding. This provided another opportunity for me to obtain meaningful emotional and practical support when I really needed it the most.

If you have employer or co-worker concerns, it may help to address the problems through effective communication with the person involved. Keep in mind that blaming someone for these problems is not going to help you solve them. Both parties need to describe to each other what the problem is, and generate potential solutions. The solution then need to be evaluated ñ that way you can determine whether, in fact, they really have helped the situation. If the problem does not resolve, continue on with the process until you both figure out and agree upon a satisfactory solution. Many times persistence pays off.

Of course, you need to judge for yourself whether this approach is the right way to go for your situation. While you do not want to lose your job, you also should not be subject to discrimination. An example of such a situation at work might be a series of actions or statements made by your supervisor that would suggest that somehow you were being marginalized because of your health problem. Rather than simply putting up with this, you can go to the source of the actions and directly communicate your concerns. If this turns out to be a continuous problem with no solution in sight, you may want to consult with your human relations office at work or, if you would be more comfortable, check with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) at <http://www.eeoc.gov/>.

Work... your brain can take it!

Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses can help you design ways to better accomplish your work-related tasks, and help you focus on self-help strategies and learned accommodations. Parts of the brain can take over for areas that may no longer function optimally. This is very good news for most of us. “Exercising” the brain by repeated practice of the tasks that challenge you at work can train you to master them again. Methodical step-by-step planning assists in getting multiple tasks completed. And cognitive retraining—a technique taught in rehabilitation programs—allows your brain to compensate for memory, attention, or organizing problems.

The use of reminders can also help. You may have been able to remember almost everything before your diagnosis, but that is probably not possible now. As others have no doubt told you, it is helpful to jot it down, use a PDA (hand-held computer), daily calendar, or note cards. These simple procedures can avoid the frustration of forgetting.

Medications may also help you stay focused and increase your concentration. Methylphenidate, more commonly referred to as Ritalin, used to treat attention deficit disorder in children and adults can be of help for some brain tumor patients, too.



Exercise

Exercise increases blood flow and oxygen in the brain, which can help with normal cognitive function, and can reduce your physical and emotional reactions to stress. Talk with your doctor about an exercise program that takes into account your general health, your treatment plan, and medications you are taking, such as steroids. Even if you have muscle weakness or some balance problems, exercises can be adapted so everyone can do something!

Try to keep stress levels low

If you are feeling down, depressed, or stressed talk with your doctor. Antidepressant medications may be beneficial, as can support resources. Keep in mind that changes in our brains from surgery, radiation and chemotherapy can cause mood fluctuations, and these feelings can affect your memory and concentration at work. Stress management, yoga, meditation, and relaxation training have been shown to be effective in managing stress in those with cancer. Try to be objective in determining true work overload from self-imposed expectations. Pace your activities, use a project timeline, and be flexible when you need to. It can be useful to view the diagnosis as an opportunity to step back from your fast paced life and really think about ways to balance business, family, friends and leisure activities.

Master the art of support

Enlist the help of family, friends and coworkers in facing your challenges. We can not underestimate the benefits of love and support offered by these important people. Their interest can keep you on a positive track and keep you motivated. The advice of different physicians and other types of providers on your healthcare team can also be invaluable.

Put it all together

Over the past decade we have learned much about stress and its effects on the brain, our immune system and the role it can play in health. Not only does the stress and frustration related to our illness affect our moods it also affects our immune system and our physical health. It can be very useful for all of us to be aware of our personal stress-triggers, and that we try to better manage them. Doing something for yourself, and taking control of your quality of life, is a very positive experience.

A note of caution

Do not think that you need to follow all of these suggestions. Do what you can, and progress in small steps. Try a new technique or accommodation, get a sense of what effect it has on you, and then try something else along with it. Take your time.

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