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# **SURVIVAL GUIDE**

**LIVING WITH CANCER  
AS A CHRONIC DISEASE**



# SURVIVAL GUIDE

## LIVING WITH CANCER AS A CHRONIC DISEASE

Medical advances are turning once-incurable cancers into chronic illnesses. Here are five strategies to help you overcome any workplace challenges.

By Jo Cavallo

A diagnosis of cancer used to be a death sentence. Thankfully, medical advancements, especially the development of more effective, targeted treatments, allow increasing numbers of cancer patients to live long and fruitful lives. Still, living with a chronic illness has its challenges.

Worry over your long-term health prospects and how your career might be affected can be a constant presence. You may fear that if you quit or lose your job, the likelihood of finding another one, especially one with the equivalent salary and benefits, will be difficult. Or you may be concerned about having to make adjustments to your workspace or work schedule. Here are five strategies to help you cope with common workplace issues survivors face.

# ISSUE #1

## INCORPORATING CANCER AND YOUR CAREER

Many employers and employees have concerns about how to handle a cancer diagnosis at work and anxiety about how it will impact productivity. And in a competitive job market, employers know they have a big pool of skilled workers to choose from. To combat these obstacles, you need to understand your organization's culture and make adjustments accordingly.

## STEPS TO TAKE

**KNOW YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS.** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects employees against workplace discrimination, including hiring, firing, and promotions, and requires that employers make reasonable accommodations so that employees with disabilities — which cancer can qualify as under the ADA — are able to function in the workplace. However, the ADA does not apply if you are no longer able to perform the essential functions of your job. To learn more about the law and how it might apply to you, consult Triage Cancer's multiple free resources, at [www.triagecancer.org/resources](http://www.triagecancer.org/resources), or visit [www.dol.gov/dol/topic/disability/ada.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/disability/ada.htm).

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## INCORPORATING CANCER AND YOUR CAREER...

**KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN.** Your cancer will likely require frequent monitoring from your oncologist and ongoing treatment to keep it stable, so ask your medical team for specific information about how your treatment plan could affect your work, including how often you might have to be out of the office for therapy and the side effects of any treatments you may need. Then schedule a meeting with your employer to discuss your medical situation and how it might impact your daily workload, as well as how the company handles other employees in similar situations. For example, would it be possible for you to work from home on the days following treatment if side effects are a problem? Or would you be able to make up any office time lost as a result of a doctor's appointment?

After speaking with your boss, be sure to make notes about what you discussed and keep records of any pertinent information, including recent performance reviews and any positive statements about your work, as well as any indications that you are being discriminated against. Having detailed records can be invaluable should you encounter problems with your employer in the future.

**“ Schedule a meeting with your employer to discuss your medical situation and how it might impact your daily workload. ”**

**MAINTAIN A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR BOSS.** Establishing a good rapport with your boss is beneficial for any employee, but perhaps even more so when you have cancer. That way, your boss may be more willing to work with you to accommodate your needs. To help keep the relationship positive, maintain your good work habits, inform your boss immediately of any change in your health status, and try to solve any resulting work issues on your own. If you can't, be sure to offer solutions or ask for recommendations.

**ASK HOW YOUR PERFORMANCE WILL BE MEASURED.** Many companies measure employees' performance based on their productivity and achieved results rather than on the number of hours spent in the office; therefore, it's vital to understand the criteria your boss will use to evaluate your job performance. The goal is to ensure that even if you can't be in the office every day, you'll still be considered a valued employee as long as the quality of your work remains high and meets or exceeds your company's standards.

**LIMIT YOUR CAREER RISK.** It's your choice as to whether or not you want to be open about your diagnosis. However, if you feel that being completely forthcoming with your employer may put you at risk of either losing your job or suffering a demotion, an alternative strategy might be to ask your employer if you can switch to a four-day workweek or work from home a certain number of days per month. That way, you'll have the flexibility you need to schedule doctor's visits or recuperate from any treatments, yet still protect your job and keep the company happy at the same time.

# ISSUE #2

## CONTENDING WITH RESENTFUL COWORKERS

For cancer survivors who have to take time off from work for treatment, it's not just the fear of job loss that's concerning — you may also have to contend with coworkers who resent that you have shortened workdays or get to work from home. They might also assume they'll be saddled with some of your workload. If any allowances are made for you, it can put you in a difficult position, and you may even hear comments from colleagues like, "It must be nice to get to go home now." You'll have to walk a fine line to keep the peace.

## STEPS TO TAKE

**TALK TO YOUR COLLEAGUES.** Explain your situation to your coworkers so that they know what to expect, and let them know how you intend to get your work done. If you find that a coworker's feelings about your cancer are hurting you, try talking to that person face-to-face. And rather than being defensive, stand up for yourself and say something like, "I understand that you have never walked in my shoes, but this is a reality for me and this is what I have to do to deal with it; so it would mean a lot to me if you refrained from making comments."

**GET HELP FROM MANAGEMENT.** If you can't resolve the problem on your own, seek advice from your supervisor or human resources department.

# ISSUE #3

## PLANNING YOUR PROFESSIONAL FUTURE

The main thing to keep in mind, say career experts, is that now is the time to plan your professional future. Of course, everyone should be thinking about what their next step will be, but it's even more important for people living with cancer, because there's a likelihood they may not be able to stay in the same job forever.

### STEPS TO TAKE

**BE DEFINITIVE ABOUT YOUR GOALS.** Think about what's important for you in your next job, what you want to avoid and where you think you'll thrive.

**RECOGNIZE YOUR VALUE.** As a cancer survivor, you may be fearful about your job, which can chip away at your self-confidence. But once you remind yourself that you really are talented, and that you've performed well and produced throughout your career, you'll start to feel good about yourself and things will begin to turn around.

“Think about what's important for you in your next job.”

## PLANNING YOUR PROFESSIONAL FUTURE...

**PICK A COMPANY THAT MEETS YOUR NEEDS.** Working for large companies may offer greater job security because they're better equipped to handle the needs of chronically ill cancer survivors and have more staff available to absorb the workload if and when you need time off. But smaller companies offer advantages, too. For one, small- to mid-size companies tend to appreciate flexibility — and accommodate it more easily.

**CONSIDER DOWNSIZING YOUR CAREER.** In some cases, no matter what you do to maintain your current job, your medical situation may make it necessary for you to consider changing jobs — and even careers — in order to cope with your circumstances. For instance, you may not be able to maintain long hours or a grueling travel schedule. Or your body simply may not be able to handle the everyday stress and strain of certain types of jobs anymore. So you may have to compromise and consider a job that's less stressful or that has reduced hours and more flexibility. The work may not pay as well or be as stimulating, but your health won't suffer as a result. Besides, having cancer just may change your perspective on how important your current career path actually is.

**CONSIDER SELF-EMPLOYMENT.** Living with cancer carries some unique workplace challenges. For instance, if you are asked to relocate, you may not be able to because you need to be near the doctors you trust. An alternative may be to become self-employed. It's a growing segment of the workforce, as companies hire more and more people on a project or assignment basis.



**STAY CURRENT.** Be sure to maintain your networking contacts and keep your resume updated.

**BE CONFIDENT.** Recognize that no decision is perfect and that there will always be repercussions, good and bad, from those decisions; but remain steadfast in your choices.

## ISSUE #4

### **WORK WITH YOUR DOCTOR TO ACCOMMODATE YOUR PROFESSIONAL NEEDS**

With the availability of more effective therapies, physicians now have more latitude and flexibility in devising a personalized treatment regimen for each patient — one that not only limits side effects without compromising care, but that works best with each particular patient’s lifestyle, especially when it comes to retaining their employment.

### **STEPS TO TAKE**

**DISCUSS TREATMENT OPTIONS.** Talk with your doctor about how your cancer may impact your career and ask how he or she can structure your treatment plan so that it maximizes the effectiveness against your cancer while minimizing the disruptiveness to your work.

## WORK WITH YOUR DOCTOR TO...

**CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVES.** Ask if there are any oral medications available to treat your cancer, or other treatment options that might be less physically draining and thus less disruptive to your work.

**UNDERSTAND YOUR SIDE EFFECTS.** Discuss with your healthcare team how your side effects will impact your work and what you might be able to do to lessen the impact.

## ISSUE #5

### DEALING WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF LIVING WITH CANCER

For a long time, people were not thinking about work and cancer together. Generally, the focus was solely on living — and rightfully so. This, however, has changed due to advancements in medicine that have created an ever-growing population of survivors. Naturally, all of the waiting and wondering associated with a cancer diagnosis can produce a lot of anxiety. You're constantly thinking, What's going to happen next? What kind of treatments will I need? How well will they work? What are my options? That much uncertainty can be enormously stressful.

## STEPS TO TAKE

**STAY POSITIVE.** If you have to alter your work schedule or change jobs to accommodate your health, don't deride yourself. You need to give yourself credit for all of the things you are still able to do and do well.

**SEEK SUPPORT.** If you're experiencing anxiety or depression, ask your medical team for a referral to a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker. Support groups can also be helpful in learning problem-solving strategies from others in similar situations.

**STRIVE FOR QUALITY OF LIFE.** People diagnosed with cancer can often get distracted by the "what ifs" and forget to live their lives. So make it your goal to live life to its fullest, regardless of your prognosis. Focus on the things you can control in your life, such as your behaviors and the things you value, and minimize the energy you spend worrying about the things that are beyond your control and that can cause stress.

**“Focus on the things you can control in your life, such as your behaviors and the things you value.”**



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