

## **After Treatment Ends – 10 Things I Have Learned by Jo Larbie**

I was diagnosed with bowel cancer in September 2011. In June 2016, I had my first clear three-month scan and one year later, my first six-month scan was also clear! Wonderful, hurrah, I can now get back to the business of living my life, at least until the next six-month scan. However, “getting back to the business of living my life” is harder than I expected. During nearly six years of treatment, my one and only goal was to make it through each cancer challenge by doing whatever was necessary to keep going, including writing and getting a book published; successfully completed my Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Master Practitioner programme; and travelling in connection with my work. This was my way of coping with the trauma.

Looking back, my ‘never, never, *never*, give up’ mind-set was key to my survival. This was important because perseverance produces endurance and with endurance comes staying power which enabled me to keep going, even though I didn’t know if or, how I was going to make it through. “Getting back to the business of living my life” is sometimes just as challenging and here are 10 things that I have learned.

### **10 things I have learned**

1. It takes more effort, energy and time to get things done and transition is not a solo effort. It’s taking time to find a support network of non-medical people who can help me move on with my life as I rebuild my life daily and now recognise and accept the difference that it can make between a good or bad day. I am working on becoming more resilient which is important because I need to manage my expectations especially as things don’t always work out as planned.
2. “I used to be somebody, now I am me!” Before cancer, I held senior positions that meant that people would always promptly respond to my emails or phone messages. After cancer, as “me”, I am constantly chasing or waiting for people to get back to me! Frustrating, yes, but I am beginning to enjoy being me and feeling increasingly free to be authentic without the limiting constraints which come with being in a senior position.
3. You don’t need to be in senior position or have a senior title to be influential and make a difference. It is about how you influence other people for good or bad – it’s about the way that you behave and way that you say it.
4. Putting yourself first is a responsible way to behave – to paraphrase the airlines’ instruction - you must take care of your safety, before helping others. It requires conscious effort to unlearn years of putting work and everybody’s needs ahead of your own. I am worth the effort!.

5. Learn to say “no” particularly when people try to pigeon-hole you based on your career and career pre-cancer. For example, if you have decided to take your career in a new direction or to do something totally different, don’t waste your time (and theirs) by letting recruitment consultants persuade you that going back to the same role albeit in a different organisation will be of interest, it won’t. It’s hard to say “no” when you are unclear about what you want and how to achieve it, particularly when you have bills to pay.  
Persevere; don’t give up because you are worth it. It takes time to make a transition or change.
6. Manage your expectations and be realistic about what, and how much you can do and deliver. As a life-long over achiever I sometimes find this very hard to do and it requires constant vigilance and action because my pre-cancer expectations, standards and performance are deeply imbedded in my psyche. Consequently, I can beat myself-up for failing to deliver what are often unrealistic high expectations; this was probably always the case pre-cancer but, then I had the drive and stamina to constantly push myself to meet them. So, I am learning to “under promise and over deliver”, which is another essential component in developing resilience.
7. Just because your diary isn’t full for the next two years does *not* make you a failure! My career involved planning and working to a three-year schedule. During treatment, my diary was controlled by my treatment team. . Rather than constantly doing, I am learning that I can chose what I do or don’t do and how I use unscheduled and unplanned days in my diary.
8. My body knows how to heal itself but sometimes it needs help. Learning to trust my body is an on-going project. It’s comparable to the experience of driving a car that starts every time but, develops a fault, stops starting every time and as a result you begin to distrust its reliability. The truth is that my body did do its job but, was too busy and ignored the signals it sent. Even so, re-learning to trust my body is crucial to “getting back to the business of living my life”. I have also made sure that my GP knows me and my medical history so that I can see him if I need to rather than pointlessly worrying about unfamiliar pains and symptoms.
9. Worrying is acceptable up to a point but, beyond this it’s unhelpful – I can’t second-guess the results of my scan but this doesn’t stop me worrying about it! When I am in the ‘worry tunnel’ I acknowledge that I am worried, and then give myself *five minutes* worry time – it’s amazing how long five minutes lasts but I make myself do it. If I am still worrying after five minutes, I will repeat the exercise.
10. I am grateful for being here, make time to appreciate and celebrate my health and my life, the fact that I am still here and finding my way through. I live in uncertain hope.