

Here I am, three months back in the office

Today marks a bit of a milestone for me. I've just got home from work. It's the longest day that I've spent in the office since going back in May and it's been a day of firsts: I used a peak time train ticket to get home; I picked up a copy of the Evening Standard and worked my way through the crossword (doing very badly because my brain is out of practice); came home on a busy train (instead of my usual empty one in the middle of the day) and walked up the hill among the other commuters to home instead of walking up the hill alone and feeling like I was being naughty by leaving the office in the middle of the day. And it kind of feels, for the first time, like the end of a normal pre-cancer working day. And that makes me very happy indeed.

You see, in October 2016 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I took an extended leave of absence from work, returning in May this year after eighteen months off. I am very lucky because I have a supportive HR department and manager who are phasing me back into work. This means that I have been working shorter hours over fewer days than I used to do and these have been increasing slowly. Just before going back to work, I wrote an [article for Working With Cancer](#) about how I was feeling. Now, four months later, I thought I would share with you how things have gone so far, and a few tips that I have gathered from my experience.

So, what have I noticed about going back to work after cancer?

1. **It is far more tiring than I had expected.** I was tired anyway so adding something else into my week was always going to be tiring. I was traveling home on the train one day – it was around 3pm – and I fell asleep. Asleep into such a deep sleep that I slept through my station and carried on further down the line. The people who do that are the people coming home at 2 am after an evening out, full of alcohol and in a drunken slumber. Not me travelling home from the office at 3pm.

So, tip no.1 is to allow for this extra tiredness and make some adjustments at home.

2. **There is a lot to organise when you work.** For example, childcare and dog walkers. I cannot tell you the number of times during the school holidays that I have forgotten I am working and not arranged childcare. And as for the dog (who we admittedly didn't have before cancer) it didn't start well when I realised the evening before starting back in the office, that I had not arranged anyone to take care of him for the day.

Tip no.2 is to be organised – write some reminders/to-do lists/set phone reminders

3. **My colleagues have been fantastic.** I haven't had any awkward cancer conversations like "but you're ok now, right?" or "my aunt had breast cancer but she died" etc. that I was warned might happen. Most people who I deal with on a day to day basis know why I have been off work so I don't need to have any uncomfortable conversations about where I have been (although I did have to explain to the very young IT guy who came to set up my computer, that, no, having had the past eighteen months off work was not "great" but because I had been ill – I think he was mortified so from then on if the issue comes up I tend not to mention illness/cancer).

Tip no.3 is be prepared for awkward conversations about your cancer and plan what you will say.

4. **It was overwhelming going back to work.** From day one, there has been a lot to think about: I needed to catch up on what I had missed; I had to get my head around personnel and departmental changes; I needed to train my brain to think fast again; I needed to organise myself and multi-task; and I had to essentially re-learn quite a lot.

Tip no.4. is to not have too much else going on in your life (if possible) when you return to work so you can focus on work without being overwhelmed.

5. **I am surprised by the extent of the reduction in my brain function.** I knew that my brain wasn't functioning as well as it used to do, pre-cancer. What with the combination of not having worked for a while plus the chemo brain and menopausal brain fog. In many ways, I felt like I was starting a new job at a new organisation.

Tip no.5 is to not expect too much of yourself when you start back because it might take a while to settle in.

6. **I wasn't prepared for feeling so emotional.** First of all, I was hit by an emotional wave as soon as I entered the office. The office smell hit me as soon as I got off the lift at my floor. It's not a horrible nor particularly pungent smell. It's just the smell of 'work' and in fact I expect that everyone else at work wouldn't even say that there was a smell. It's just a mix of coffee and, probably, the carpet cleaner but it is the unmistakably familiar, comforting smell of work. And it brought back a surge of memories (16 years-worth) as I stepped out of the lift onto my floor. Which then immediately reminded me that I had been absent from the office for the past eighteen months while work (and life) had carried on without me. Which in turn made me realise that life in general had carried on for eighteen months without me. And that made me really sad.

And then there is the issue of the photo. We have our photos everywhere. They are on our passes and on our computers. When you send an email, the email has a little photo of you up there in the right-hand top corner. Just a couple of centimetres square. And my photo is of someone who looks a bit like me, but isn't quite me. She has long curly blond hair and a carefree smile of someone who doesn't know what is coming her way. I can't look at that photo. I want to cry when I look at her. I want to warn her about what is about to happen to her. And of course, there are hoops to jump through in order to get your photo changed which include only taking photos on Fridays – I don't work on Fridays. And there is no chance of changing that, even if I play the "cancer-made-me-lose-my-hair-and-I-don't-want-to-look-at-my-pre-cancer-photo-all-day-every-day" card.

Tip no.6 is to expect some emotional moments and don't be put off by them.

I'll admit that for a while after starting back, I wondered whether I would settle back in. Would I remember names, would I remember how to do my job, would I remember the various office policies and procedures, would I be able to organise myself, would I be able to function in the office, would I be able to increase my hours, would I be able to get myself back into "professional-working-in-the-office" me? And now, nearly four months into it, I can say yes to all those questions. I am not there yet, but I have come a long way since May. I am pleased that I came back to work. It is lovely to see all my work colleagues. It is challenging and exciting to be engaging my brain in a work situation again. And most of all, it feels like I am on the path to regaining a bit part of normality.

Sara is the founder of www.tickingoffbreastcancer.com, a website dedicated to helping people through their breast cancer treatment from diagnosis to living life to the full once treatment ends. Aged 42 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, Sara decided to set up the website to support those who do not know which way to turn for help after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis; those who are overwhelmed by the breast cancer resources online; those who may be scared to go online for fear of what they might find; and those just looking for a comfortable, safe, calm place to turn for help. The website provides practical advice for each step of the way, together with many links and signposts to other online resources. Follow her on [FaceBook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).