

#Iamstillme

Understanding the invisible by Lynne, a 45-yr old working mum...

It's not easy supporting a colleague who is working with cancer – we all recognise that – but for those of us with metastatic or 'secondary' cancer, it feels like we have an invisible illness which isn't seen and others can't always be aware of. In supporting your colleague to work and live with cancer, what you need to know is that every day and every week, **cancer is a challenge whether you can see it or not.**

When I look in the mirror, I see myself, I don't see someone with cancer. So, if I can't see it why should others? So many people I meet tell me how well I look. Maybe they are just being tactful or kind, maybe their eyesight isn't so great, but nonetheless they say it. My reality is that everything has changed, and just because something can't be seen, it doesn't mean that it's not happening or at times, isn't extremely challenging and upsetting. My whole world has been and continues to be upended yet my body is telling the outside world that I'm fine.

The physical effects can be far reaching, like your mobility reducing or losing your hair, to less obvious ones like your nails breaking, your hands and feet swelling or losing feeling, your skin breaking out, being in constant pain – all side effects from treatment. I, like many people with cancer, try not to focus on them as they're inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But they have a huge impact on how I feel and look, and what clothes and even shoes I can wear. On top of that there's the fatigue and feeling exhausted a lot of the time - going into work when it can feel like a day with the worst hangover ever or flu isn't easy. Facing a day at work where you need to be on top form, for Board meetings and making a presentation while feeling like this, is even harder.

A big part of dealing with cancer is also about getting your head around it. When you're at work it can feel unreal because you're distracted... and then it'll hit you. For example, when you are talking about next year's plans, or the three-year strategy, or the future in general. You wonder whether you'll still be around, and even whether you can commit to a holiday with friends in a few months' time.

I, like many others I meet, don't want to stop work; why should I? I've worked hard to be in this job, I've got goals to achieve and an impact to make. Why should I give up when I love my job and it gives me purpose beyond my cancer? An understanding company and colleagues help me to make that a reality, knowing that I'm still me. If you put yourself in the shoes of a colleague who is living with cancer for just a moment, imagine what it's like when your brain is the same but your body is letting you down. So how can you help someone like me?

If you are the manager of someone with cancer, there are lots of practical things you can do for example, by considering:

- How can the job can be done flexibly, for example, at home or even during/after hospital appointments, as long as the person is still producing the outcomes required?
- What are the main results this person should be aiming for, rather than the 100 nice to dos?

- What travel is critical and how could video conferencing or other forms of technology help?
 - What additional parts of the person's role could be development opportunities for others?
 - How can diary management help to avoid back-to-back meetings in the same, or even worse, a different location? Is the meeting even really necessary?
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This year, I arguably achieved the best results in any year of my working life by considering all of the above, and by working in a more focussed way. As the cliché goes – it's not rocket science – and I've learned a lot about how we should all be working.

And help can also be offered in the smallest, but often the most important, of ways... a note from a colleague ahead of a challenging hospital scan to remind me that they care, another saving me a desk in the morning which has the most comfortable chair, another reminding me that I'm part of a 'work family' and don't need to ask for help when times are tough.

I know they would do this for any colleague in similar circumstances but I hope if or when they read this blog, they understand how important their help is and how much it means to me.