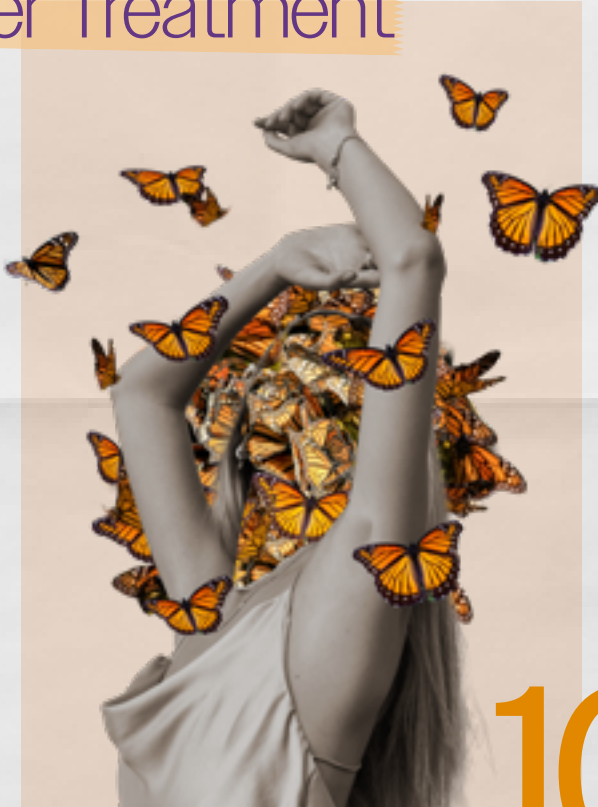


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Returning to **Work and Social Life** After Treatment



10 OCT / 2025

ENGAGE
ESGO | European Network of Gynaecological
Cancer Advocacy Groups

OBJECTIVE



Support patients in **reintegrating into work and social life** — overcoming the physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges of adapting to life after cancer.

01

UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION BACK TO WORK AND SOCIAL LIFE

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Returning to work and social life after cancer treatment is a significant milestone, but it looks **different for everyone**. Some survivors may feel ready and excited to jump back into their routines, while others may face physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges that make returning to work or social activities feel overwhelming.

It's important to remember that there is no „right“ way to reintegrate into daily life. Some may go back to work full-time and others may transition to part-time or remote work, while some may find that continuing in their previous job is no longer an option. Whatever you choose to do is okay. Finding new ways to engage with life — whether through volunteering, exploring creative pursuits, or focusing on personal well-being — is just as valuable.

The key is honouring your needs, setting realistic expectations, and taking things at your own pace. Whether you are returning to work, adjusting to a new social dynamic, or exploring different paths, you deserve to create a balanced and fulfilling post-treatment life that aligns with your health and happiness.

I am growing...

02



SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THINGS MAY FEEL DIFFERENT. RECOVERY DOESN'T HAPPEN ALL AT ONCE — IT UNFOLDS SLOWLY, AND IT'S NORMAL TO NOTICE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, OR MENTAL CHANGES THAT WEREN'T THERE BEFORE. BE KIND TO YOURSELF AS YOU NAVIGATE THESE SHIFTS.

Be open to adjustments.

You may notice that your energy, focus, or stamina isn't what it used to be. That's not a failure — it's a natural part of healing. Adapting your expectations to fit your current capacity is an act of self-care, not defeat.

Flexibility is key

There will be good days and bad ones, and that's completely normal. Give yourself permission to change plans, rest when needed, and respond to your body and mind with compassion.

Success looks different now.

It's not about returning to how things used to be, but about finding a new rhythm that supports your health, energy, and priorities. What matters most is creating a life that feels manageable, meaningful, and right for you today.



It's okay if you don't return to exactly where you were before.

You may find yourself missing parts of your "old self" — your energy, your focus, your pace. That sense of loss is real, and it's okay to grieve it. Acknowledging that things have changed doesn't mean giving up; it means making space for self-compassion as you adjust. You are still growing, and this can be an opportunity to reshape your life in ways that support who you are now, not who you used to be.

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03

It can change!



**POSSIBLE
CHALLENGES:**
*PHYSICAL & COGNITIVE
ISSUES*

Cognitive Challenges

Memory lapses, trouble concentrating, and slower thinking — sometimes called “chemo brain” — can make returning to work and social life feel especially difficult.

These symptoms are common after treatment, but that doesn't make them any less frustrating. Many survivors worry about whether these changes are permanent.



WHILE THIS FEAR IS COMPLETELY VALID, IT'S HELPFUL TO KNOW THAT FOR MOST PEOPLE, COGNITIVE FUNCTION IMPROVES GRADUALLY OVER TIME.



I will try new hobbies!

Patience, rest, and consistent mental engagement — such as reading, doing puzzles, or learning something new — can all support recovery.

If you find that cognitive difficulties persist or begin to interfere with your daily life, consider seeking neuropsychological support. A specialist can offer guidance, reassurance, and tailored strategies to help you feel more in control again.

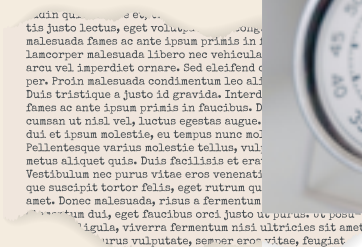
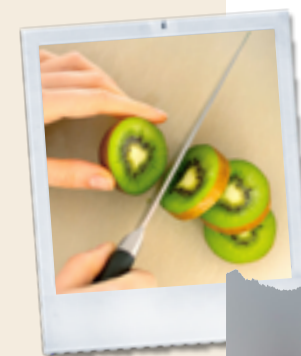
Possible Solutions

Use planners, sticky notes, and phone reminders to stay organized.

Break large tasks into smaller steps and allow extra time for complex work.

Engage in brain exercises like reading, doing puzzles, or learning a new skill.

If needed, ask for accommodations at work (e.g., deadline flexibility, assistive tools).



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Managing Fatigue & Physical Readjustment

Physical challenges such as fatigue, chronic pain, neuropathy, and reduced stamina can persist long after treatment, making daily tasks — both at work and in social settings — feel **overwhelming**.

Some survivors may also experience muscle weakness, joint stiffness, or lingering effects from surgery and radiation, impacting their mobility and physical endurance.



Possible Solutions

Pace yourself. Gradually increase your workload instead of jumping in full speed.

Use the “spoon theory”. Allocate energy wisely, prioritising the most important tasks and scheduling breaks.

Prioritize rest. Listen to your body and avoid overloading your schedule.



Make workplace adjustments. If needed, discuss phased return-to-work options or reduced hours with your employer.

Manage chronic pain and neuropathy. Use ergonomic workspaces, physical therapy, gentle exercises, or heat/cold therapy to reduce discomfort.

Improve strength and mobility. Stretch regularly, engage in light activity, and consider occupational therapy if needed.



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NAVIGATING PRACTICAL CHALLENGES & THEIR SOLUTIONS



Returning to Work: Managing Expectations and Accommodations

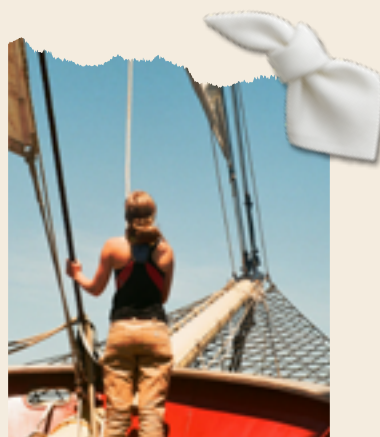
Returning to work after cancer treatment can be both exciting and daunting. While some survivors are eager to regain a sense of normalcy, others may feel anxious about the transition.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT RETURNING TO WORK IS NOT JUST ABOUT SHOWING UP — IT'S ABOUT FINDING A SUSTAINABLE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR HEALTH, ENERGY LEVELS, AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

Setting Realistic Goals

You don't have to jump back into full-time work immediately. Start with fewer hours and increase commitments as energy allows.

Adjust your workload. If concentration is an issue, make to-do lists, use phone reminders, and break tasks into smaller steps.



So, what can help me?



Communicating With Employers

If you need **workplace accommodations** like flexible hours, remote work, or a lighter workload, don't hesitate to request them. These changes can support your well-being and performance.

It's common to worry about being seen as less reliable or capable after illness. **These fears are valid** and needing support doesn't make you less valuable as an employee.

You don't have to share everything. Just focus on communicating what helps you work effectively, only disclosing what feels comfortable.

If talking directly feels **overwhelming**, consider **writing down** your needs beforehand or involving human resources (HR) in the conversation.

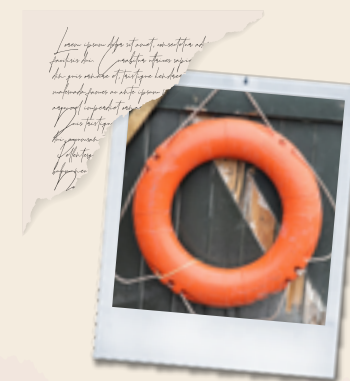
MANY COUNTRIES PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF CANCER SURVIVORS TO REQUEST REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS. IF YOU'RE UNSURE, REACH OUT TO HR OR LEGAL SUPPORT FOR GUIDANCE.

Managing Workplace Conversations

Some colleagues may expect you to be at full capacity right away. **Let them know** if you still have limitations: "I'm happy to be back, but I'm still managing some post-treatment effects and may need flexibility as I adjust."

Some coworkers may avoid discussing your cancer experience, while others may ask intrusive questions. Prepare a few **standard responses**: "Thanks for asking, I'm focusing on getting back into the swing of things."

You are not obligated to explain everything. **Share only what feels comfortable.**



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Exploring Career Changes & Finding Meaning in Work

Some survivors return to their old careers, while others feel drawn to something new.

Reevaluate your priorities.

Do you want more flexibility?
Do you need less stress?
Does your old job still feel fulfilling?

Consider new opportunities.

Part-time work, consulting, or even transitioning into patient advocacy may feel more aligned with your new perspective.

Give yourself permission to change paths.

It's okay if your career goals have shifted; your well-being comes first.

RETURNING TO WORK ISN'T ABOUT PICKING UP WHERE YOU LEFT OFF — IT'S ABOUT FINDING A BALANCE THAT WORKS FOR YOU NOW.

Social Reintegration: Managing Conversations & Boundaries

Returning to social life after cancer can feel overwhelming, especially if people expect you to “be back to normal.” Many people expect survivors to resume life as it was before, unaware of lingering physical or emotional challenges



Setting **boundaries** and expressing **your needs** — whether they be extra rest, continued medical care, or emotional support — can help others **understand** that recovery is a process, not a single event.

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Start small and set your own pace.

If socializing feels overwhelming, begin with short, low-key gatherings or one-on-one interactions before easing into larger events. Give yourself permission to leave early or take breaks as needed.

Prioritize meaningful connections.

You don't have to accept every invitation. Focus on relationships and activities that feel uplifting and fulfilling.

Prepare for different reactions.

Some people may ask intrusive questions, while others may avoid the topic of cancer altogether. Decide in advance how much, when, and with whom you want to share your experience. Having a few prepared responses can help you navigate conversations confidently.



Communicate your needs clearly.

Friends and family may not always understand your limitations. Let them know what helps — whether it's shorter visits, quieter settings, avoiding certain topics, or scheduling downtime before and after social events.



05

*I am grateful
for my friends.*



EMBRACING SOCIAL LIFE
& **REDISCOVERING
YOURSELF**

Survivorship is an opportunity to embrace **new beginnings**, redefine your identity, and explore what truly brings you joy.



While cancer may have changed aspects of your life, it does not define you. Moving forward is about honouring your past while stepping into a future filled with possibilities.

Seek support.

Connecting with others who understand your journey can be incredibly beneficial.

Consider: Joining a support group for cancer survivors. Speaking with a therapist or counsellor to process emotions. Engaging in community or online forums with others who share similar experiences.

Explore new interests.

Try activities that spark curiosity and fulfilment — whether it's art, travel, learning a new skill, or volunteering. If you're unsure where to start, think back to what brought you joy as a child. Revisiting old hobbies or interests can reignite passion and provide a comforting sense of familiarity.



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Set personal goals.

Setting small, achievable goals can rebuild confidence and create a sense of purpose.

Consider: Establishing a daily routine. Joining a club or community group. Setting fitness goals. Learning something new.

Each step forward contributes to progress and self-discovery.



Reconnect with loved ones.

Strengthening relationships with family and friends provides emotional nourishment and a sense of belonging.

Plan regular get-togethers. Reach out to old friends. Build new social circles that align with your current values and interests.

I am moving forward!

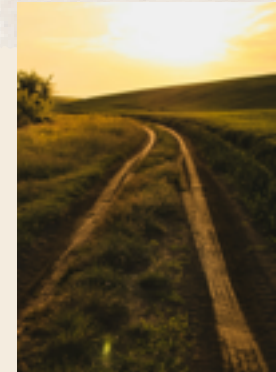


Give yourself permission to **move forward**. It's natural to reflect on your cancer experience, but you don't have to let it define your future.

LET GO OF GUILT, EMBRACE CHANGE, AND ALLOW YOURSELF THE FREEDOM TO PURSUE NEW DREAMS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES.

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This is your time to move forward in a way that works for you. Whether you return to your old routine, explore new paths, or simply take time to heal, remember **you are strong, capable, and deserving of a fulfilling life**. Take things one step at a time, at your own pace.



And while life may never be exactly as it was before, this **new chapter** can bring its own meaning.



Values may shift, priorities may evolve — and with these changes, opportunities for growth can emerge. Alongside grief, there can also be resilience and a **renewed sense of what matters most**.





Affirmations

I trust my ability to return to work at my own pace, knowing that taking it slow is not a setback but a smart strategy.

I am allowed to ask for adjustments at work that help me perform my best while prioritizing my health.

Fatigue and brain fog may be challenges, but I have the tools and strategies to manage them effectively.

I am not obligated to explain my experience to everyone. I choose what and how much I share.

If my old career no longer fits my needs, I am open to new opportunities that align with my well-being.

Socializing may feel different, but I will reconnect in ways that feel comfortable and fulfilling for me.

I set boundaries without guilt because my energy and recovery matter just as much as my responsibilities.

I focus on what I can do rather than dwell on what I used to do, embracing my new normal with strength.

I will celebrate small wins — whether it's completing a workday, attending a gathering, or simply feeling good.

My value is not measured by how quickly I return to “normal” but by how well I care for myself along the way.

It's okay if I don't return to the person I was before. This is a new chapter, and I will create a life that works for me now.