Many cancer survivors report receiving little advice from care providers & experience apprehension about returning to work.

**Study Objectives**

- To conduct inquiries related to work return and maintenance following cancer with key stakeholders:
  - Survivors
  - Physicians
  - Industry (insurers, employers)
- To adapt and pilot an intervention

This presentation summarizes survivors’ experiences.

**Methods**

- Participants employed at the time of cancer diagnosis
- 2 semi-structured interviews
- Between interviews, participants took photos reflective of their work experience following cancer
- Discussed the meaning of the photos during the second interview

**Participant Demographics**

- 10 women; 10 men
- 38-82 years of age (avg. 57 yrs)
- 16 white; 2 Asian; 2 South Asian
- 7 breast cancer; 6 prostate; 3 colorectal; 1 non-Hodgkins lymphoma; 1 pancreatic; 1 melanoma; 1 renal cell
- 4/20 suffered significant reduction in post-cancer family income
- 14 family incomes ≥$100,000
- All had college or university education
- 16 white collar professionals; 1 farmer, 1 food service industry; 1 video producer; 1 chemical industry
- Time with employer prior to diagnosis: 1-20+ yrs

**Theme 1: Reasons to Return to Work**

I couldn’t lift [the seed bags] to put them in the seeder…company established in 1784…the property I own almost 100 years less than that in our family…The push is totally internal…the strongest motivations…are tradition. Peter

Other reasons given for returning to work

- A return to normal, health and well being
- A demonstration of resilience/strength
- A need to be productive
- Meaningfulness of the work
- Social connectedness
- Distraction from cancer
- Sense of being valued at work
- Love of the job
- Underscored sense of identity
- Financial incentive (never primary reason)

**Theme 2: The Timing of Return to Work**

What was significant [about my] return to work was selection of the date…I wanted to go back to work because July felt like I was on vacation… I was taking care of my mental health but I felt like I was more on vacation and I started to feel uncomfortable…I’m not taking care of the treatments or anything and so I was debating July too early, September too late, so first of August. Josée

**Theme 3: Support & Caring at Work**

I realized maybe about a month & a half ago that one of my friends was still making the full pot of coffee, expecting me to come in at any time…when I go into the office there was always a full pot of coffee on…he was making the coffee just in case I came in…the connection is always there & [I am] always welcome. Lisa

**Theme 4: Return to Work as a Process**

This is my couch here in my office…when I’m really exhausted and I just can’t move anymore I lock my door and I pull this out and I sleep…without that I could not have returned to work...The symbol here is a new phase of being able to return to work. There can be a transitional phase. It’s not black and white. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if when a cancer patient came back if [the employer] sat down beforehand with them and said how can we make your space workable for you?...Why don’t we take an office that’s not being used or a broom closet, why don’t we put a coat of paint on there and...if you need a nap, you go in there. Just thinking a little bit about how we can accommodate different types of needs. Melanie

**Conclusions**

- There are multiple reasons why survivors desire to return to work. For many, work holds importance for their quality of life.
- In a void of support, survivors must independently determine when and how to reintegrate into work in the face of chronic disease and treatment sequelae.
- Caring & support provided by others, both at work & home, is critical to a successful return to work. While some survivors faced ignorance and discrimination, most survivors were enveloped with care and compassion.

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