Survivors’ Experiences with Employment

MORE THAN 14 MILLION CANCER SURVIVORS LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES—and the number is rising. Cancer and cancer treatment can impact survivors’ employment in both positive and negative ways. Cancer survivors face decisions and issues such as

› Deciding whether they can—and want to—continue working, take time off, retire, or change their job schedule or roles
› Considering whether, when, and how to talk to their employer and co-workers about their condition
› Maintaining their health insurance and other benefits when they are not working
› Getting needed support from their employer and co-workers
› Understanding federal protection laws.

MOST CANCER SURVIVORS WORK AFTER DIAGNOSIS

The 2012 LIVESTRONG Survey provides important information about the employment experiences of cancer survivors. Of survey respondents who were diagnosed in 2002 or later and were aged 15 or older at the time of diagnosis, 80% worked for pay at a job or a business after their diagnosis.

CANCER INTERFERES WITH MANY SURVIVORS’ ABILITY TO WORK

Most cancer survivors who had worked since their diagnosis reported that cancer interfered with their ability to perform work-related physical (67%) and mental (61%) tasks; 72% said they were less productive at work. Women were more likely than men to report a negative impact on their work productivity (75% vs. 67%, p < .001). Women were also more likely than men to report a negative impact on their ability to perform work-related physical (71% vs. 61%, p < .001) and mental tasks (67% vs. 52%, p < .001). Differences by age are presented in Table 1.

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<th>Age at Diagnosis</th>
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<td>15–39</td>
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<td>Interfered with ability to perform...</td>
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<tr>
<td>physical tasks</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<td>mental tasks</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<td>Less productive at work</td>
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CHANGES IN WORK STATUS ARE COMMON, ESPECIALLY DURING TREATMENT

More than three-quarters (78%) of survivors who had been employed made a change to their work hours, duties, or employment status because of cancer, its treatment, or its lasting effects. Women were less likely than men to take extended paid time off and were more likely to take unpaid time off (p < 0.001). Differences by age are presented in Figure 1.

 Survivors were most likely to change their work status during the course of treatment; 88% of survivors took extended time off, 80% took unpaid time off, and 65% switched from full- to part-time status while they were in treatment. For most survivors, a change in
work status was temporary—69% took extended paid time off, 66% took unpaid time off, and 50% changed from full- to part-time status for less than 6 months. However, more than half (58%) of those who changed to a less demanding job maintained that status for longer than 6 months (30% for 1 to 3 years and 28% for 3 years or more).

CANCER AFFECTS PROMOTIONS, ADVANCEMENT, AND RETIREMENT PLANS

More than half (55%) of cancer survivors were worried that they would be forced to retire or quit before they were ready, and almost one-third (32%) decided not to pursue an advancement or promotion. Female survivors were significantly more likely to not pursue an advancement or promotion or to retire early; they were also more worried about having to quit or retire before they were ready. Differences by age are presented in Figure 2.

MOST SURVIVORS GET SUPPORT FROM THEIR CO-WORKERS

Sixty percent of survivors said co-workers supported them through activities such as donating sick time or picking up extra duties for them. Women (61% vs. 57% for men, p=0.02) and survivors who were younger at the time of diagnosis were more likely to get support from co-workers (66% of survivors aged 15 to 39 at diagnosis, 59% of survivors aged 40 to 59, and 45% of survivors aged 60 or older).

OVERALL, SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON THEIR WORK LIVES

Twenty-four percent of survivors said cancer had a mostly negative impact on their work life or career, and an equal proportion reported a mostly positive impact. One-third reported equally positive and negative impacts, and the remaining 19% felt the impact was neither positive nor negative. Survivors who were younger at the time of diagnosis and male survivors tended to report more positive impacts on their work lives.

For additional information and resources about cancer and employment, see http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/managing-your-life-during-treatment/employment-issues/.