

BMDA Chemobrain

Tips for Returning to Work

“Chemobrain” is a term used to describe problems with thinking. You have trouble using your cognitive (mental) functions as well as you did before cancer and cancer treatment.

The decision to return to work during or after cancer treatment is important. With the help of your doctor and a neuropsychologist, you can find out what tasks will be manageable at work and what tasks may be difficult. With this information, you can make a plan to overcome the hard tasks before you return to work.

The following tips will help you manage work related tasks while you deal with symptoms of chemobrain.

Make a Plan and Start Slow

When you return to work, it may be best to start slow. Start with a few hours per day, a few days per week. Slowly increase the number of hours you work per day and the number of days you work per week. If your goal is 15 hours per week, space out those 15 hours across several days of the week, instead of working 2 full days. This will help with your energy level and productivity.

You also may ask your employer about working flexible hours or job-sharing.

Manage Fatigue

Fatigue is a common symptom of cancer and cancer treatment. Fatigue can be physical, causing muscle weakness. It can also be mental, reducing alertness or concentration.

Develop a plan to conserve your energy for the things that are most important to you. To develop an energy conservation plan:

- Take an inventory of your energy levels. Determine at what time of the day you are most energetic, somewhat energetic and least energetic. Consider your medicine schedule and how certain medicines affect your energy level.
- Write down all of your daily activities, both work and personal.
- Determine what can reasonably be done during the periods when you are feeling most energetic.
- Delegate activities that can be done by others to other people, both at work and at home.
- Focus on doing tasks that require more effort first to avoid the effects of fatigue later.
- Balance activities so you are doing, resting, doing, resting. Stop to rest before you get tired, even if it means stopping in the middle of a task.

- Get a good night's sleep. If you have a hard time falling or staying asleep on a regular basis, tell your doctor.
- Exercise at some point in the day. Exercise can be helpful for attention, mood, energy levels and sleep. Talk with your doctor before you start any formal exercise program.

Get Organized

Use a Day Planner

If you already use a day planner, whether paper or digital, get used to using it more often. If you have not used a planner, purchase one that will be useful to you. A neuropsychologist can help you learn how and when to use a planner to be most effective at work.

Always have your day planner accessible to you. Avoid situations where you receive information without the chance to write it down. Write down, in your planner, all meetings, appointments and tasks as soon as you learn about them. Get in the habit of checking your day planner as soon as you arrive at work and at regular intervals throughout the day, such as breakfast, mid-morning lunchtime and afternoon.

Avoid sticky notes and scraps of paper. Sticky or Post-It notes are not the best for helping you remember things. Instead, use your day planner as your “master memory device.” If you need to write down a note, write it directly into your planner. If you need to jot something down and you do not have your planner, go ahead and do so on a scrap of paper. Then immediately transfer any important information to your planner and throw away that scrap of paper to avoid clutter. Too many sticky notes on your desk and computer simply create distractions and can easily become lost.

Once you begin using a planner efficiently, you look at it several times a day and constantly remind yourself of important things. You only have to check one place to find what it is you need to know, instead of searching through pieces of scrap paper and sticky notes.

Structure Your Time

Use your day planner to help structure your time at work. To do this:

- Create a list of tasks to be accomplished that day.
- Rate the tasks according to their priority and complexity. Ask for help prioritizing if you feel overwhelmed or unsure.
- Assign a length of time to each task (for example, check and respond to emails for 30 minutes, attend meeting for 45 minutes)
- Considering the number of tasks, their priority, and the time to complete each task, enter them into specific timeslots in your planner accordingly.
- Go back to your planner after completing each task. Mark the task you just finished as completed and review what is next.

- Keep a running “master to-do list” to keep track of all tasks you are working on across the week or month. This can go in a separate area of your planner or entered as a digital note in most mobile devices.

Manage Tasks

Remember to complete one task before you start another. Consider the following strategy when you begin a new task: “STOP” – Stop, Think, Organize and Proceed.

If a task is new to you, write down step-by-step instructions on how to complete it. You may want to review these instructions with a supervisor or colleague in order to ensure you understand everything. Keep a folder on your device or binder on your desk where you can file these important instructions and checklists.

For bigger projects, break down the task into smaller chunks. Work on the smaller chunks one at a time. The act of simply thinking how to break down large tasks into more manageable chunks will help organize a plan and your time.

Use an alarm or timer to keep track of how much time you are spending on each task. This will help you stay on schedule. For example, when you begin checking emails, set a timer or alarm to go off in 30 minutes.

It may also help to use reminders. Many pagers, timers, cell phones and computerized calendars have alarms and reminders. If you know you have an important meeting at 2:00 p.m., program your device to send you an alert at 1:45 p.m.

Take breaks between tasks to help you stay efficient. Other good times to take breaks are when you notice you are frustrated, overwhelmed or tired. That is a good time to get up, take a brief walk around the office and then return to what you were doing. A 5-minute break can prevent you from pushing yourself into frustration and confusion.

Minimize Stress

Cancer and cancer treatment can cause changes in your brain that may affect your mood and lead you to feel more stressed. Learning stress management techniques, such as relaxation, yoga or meditation, can help improve your mood.

When you return to work, be honest about your needs and expectations. This will help minimize frustration. You should also understand the expectations of your employer. Work with your employer to change responsibilities as necessary.

Most important, do not be afraid to ask for help. Learn about your company’s resources, resources at your hospital and resources in your community.

Talk with your doctor if you feel down, depressed or anxious to the point that it interferes with your daily life. Antidepressant medicines and support resources, such as individual counseling or support groups, may be helpful.

At the Office

Reduce Distractions

Many people become distracted easily, which makes it hard to concentrate on projects and multi-task. To reduce distractions:

- Close your office door. If appropriate, hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign.
- Use earplugs or soundproof headphones if you are in a cubicle or otherwise cannot avoid noise.
- Send incoming phone calls to voice mail when you are already engaged in a task.
- Ask coworkers to email or fax rather than calling or stopping by with messages.
- Schedule time in your daily planner to go back, retrieve and respond to your phone and electronic messages.
- Remove or neatly place aside anything on your desk that can distract you from the task you are working on at the moment.
- Make a conscious effort to finish one task before moving on to the next

Manage Phone Messages

Instead of using scrap paper for phone messages, consider keeping one specific notepad by the telephone where you always write down phone messages. When you take a message, focus on the most important information in the message:

- Caller’s name
- Caller’s phone number
- Content of the message
- Date & time of the call

On the same notepad, make a note of the date and time you returned the call and the resolution.

Develop Routines

Consistent routines place less demand on your memory.

For example:

- Look at your planner and plan your schedule of activities every day at 8:30 a.m.
- Check and return phone calls and emails every day at 10:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. Check your planner and update your progress at the same time.
- Bill every day at 4:00 p.m.
- Prepare a weekly report every Friday at 3:00 p.m.

Maybe there is an “end of the day routine” that you always do. You could create a master checklist in your planner or device and review it at the end of each day.

For example, before I leave:

- Log off of network.
- Turn off computer.
- Turn off coffee pot.
- Turn off lights.
- Send calls to voice mail.
- Clear desk.
- Take badge, pager and car/office/home keys with me.

Create a Filing System

Create a filing system that makes sense to you. Use folders of one color for one project and a different color for another project. Consider creating bins or folders for:

1. To-Do ASAP
2. To- Do Less Urgent
3. To Read.

Find a Place for Everything

Rearrange your workspace to create a less disruptive environment. Keep things in the same place at all times: on your desk, in a cabinet or in a file. For example, the stapler always stays on the left side of the computer.

Audio Record Meetings

Most cell phones are equipped with audio recording applications. Audio record (with permission) important meetings, so you can always go back and review any critical points you missed the first time. You can then take notes from your recording, if necessary. Have a system to keep track of notes. For example, keep a folder or binder specifically for meetings with your boss and a different folder for weekly project meetings.

Reduce Everyday Memory Failures

Reading

To remember what you read, stop at the end of each paragraph or page and think about what you have read. Summarize it. Use highlighters to mark key information as you read. Keep a tablet nearby to write down questions and comments as you read.

Consider using the following steps when you are reading or otherwise learning new material:

- Preview: Skim over the material you are about to read.
- Question: Ask questions about the information you are about to read. What is it that you hope to learn?
- Read: Read the material thoroughly.
- State: State the answers to your questions. If you are not sure, read again.

- Test: Afterwards, test yourself at regular intervals to ensure you remember information you have learned. For example, after using this technique in the morning, return to the questions you created that afternoon and be sure you can still answer them. Do the same thing the following morning. If you are not sure of the answers, read again.

Parking

Try one of these options to help you remember where you park your car:

- Always park in the same place, so there is never a question.
- Write a note in your planner or device describing where you have parked (i.e. level 3, west side of garage).
- Purchase a watch with a recording device. Every time you park, record your location
- Record your location into your cell phone with a text note or photo.

Directions

Perhaps you travel throughout your workday to different businesses or customers. Keep addresses of places you visit often in a section of your planner or a folder on your device. Most cell phones are equipped with navigation applications. Enter the destination address in the application and increasingly rely upon the device for directions. Alternatively, you can keep separate index cards in the glove compartment in your car for frequently visited destinations. Write the name of the place in large letters at the top of the card and the directions below. Put a stick-on clip on your dashboard and place the appropriate card in the clip before you set out.