

Improving care for our own employees: A needs assessment for workplace programs to assist cancer survivors

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Introduction

Many survivors wish to return to work after taking disability leave for cancer, or, to continue working throughout their treatment. Returning to work is a step that can signify recovery and can provide a sense of regaining control. Work is also an important source of income, social support, and personal satisfaction. Although some cancer survivors may experience emotional and physical challenges after treatment, a number of studies have shown that these individuals can remain in the workforce. Return to work rates vary depending on demographic & socioeconomic factors; job-type; cancer site, stage, and prognosis; and, disease-related factors such as fatigue, pain and difficulty with concentration. Workplace accommodations, including flexible work hours, have been shown to be a pivotal factor in the successful return to work and continued employment of cancer survivors. To return to and sustain work, some cancer survivors need support from their employer. With the goal of improving survivorship care for our own employees, we set out to determine the work-related issues of employees who took disability leave for cancer, and, to assess interest in workplace programs to assist MSKCC cancer survivors.

Methods

A survey was mailed to 110 individuals who had entered the case-management system of MSKCC between December 15, 2005 and March 15, 2010 with the diagnosis of cancer. An invitation to participate was requested by a cover letter. All responses were voluntary and anonymous. The research was approved by the IRB.

Results

Among the 61 responders (response rate of 56%), the most common return to work challenges included fatigue (46%), physical difficulties (29%), emotional strain (22%), and pain (20%). Less frequent challenges were difficulties concentrating/problems with memory (13%), attending to personal needs (11%) and social support (9%). The majority of cancer survivors (59%) indicated that a work accommodation would have made return to work easier. Thirty nine percent reported no challenges on returning to work after disability leave due to cancer.

Participants were highly motivated to continue their employment after treatment for cancer, with common motivations being liking work at MSKCC (76%), wishing to return to life as usual (61%), making a contribution (61%), helpfulness of MSKCC during illness (56%), and needing the benefits and money (52%, 44%). Seventy percent of participants said they would have liked referral to one or more wellness program. Cancer survivors identified interest in particular workplace supports addressing their unique situation.

Identified opportunities include: (1) Information dissemination/education that can assist employees with common cancer symptoms and difficulties with functioning; (2) tailored psychosocial support (i.e. support groups specifically for MSKCC staff who are cancer survivors); (3) enhanced access to relevant wellness services (i.e. nutrition, smoking cessation, fitness); (4) optimization of organizational resources (i.e. employee health, human resources) to assist in coordinating medical leave and return to work after cancer treatment.

Conclusions

There is organizational commitment to care for our own employees who have been diagnosed with cancer. Having identified needs, preferences, and opportunities for improvement from our own cancer survivors, MSKCC is starting an "Employee Cancer Survivorship" program which will be available to all interested staff.