

Patient experience: 'Cancer can make you question everything'

James Kirk (pictured) explains how the Macmillan Cancer and Work service is helping him to prepare for full-time work.



☞ I was diagnosed with a brain tumour when I was really young, which meant my early teenage years were a struggle and I had problems at school with a lot of absences. This led to me leaving school at 16 years old with fewer qualifications that I would have expected. I went to college at 17 and did a diploma course, but for years afterwards it did not lead to any work. For quite a few years I kind of drifted and was lacking in confidence

When I think back to that time between the ages of 12 and 17, it was children's services that were great for me. I felt especially supported by Children with Cancer and Leukaemia Advice and Support for Parents (CCLASP), a Scottish charity that helps children and teenagers suffering from cancer. As I went into adulthood, I was trying for jobs but never succeeding, and I was on my own more.

I realise now that part of the problem was the late effects of having a brain tumour and treatment, and that this can affect someone for longer than you imagine. I especially felt the impact on my function and how I felt about myself. My confidence was low at times and my energy and sleep were affected. Cancer can put you right back and make you question everything. You can't give up though.

After 10 years of remission, I had a recurrence of my cancer at age 22. Bang out of the blue, I got a germ cell tumour that grew out of my original tumour, and I had to have brain surgery. By this time, I was living in my own flat and was independent, but it was still a blow. The medical and nursing staff were great, and family and friends were really supportive, but my confidence did take a knock and I started questioning everything again.

Last year I came into contact with the Macmillan Cancer and Work service in Fife, in the East of Scotland. They help people with getting ready for work or support them to access education and training support if they want it. A big thing for me will be how I choose to disclose information about my history and if I need reasonable adjustments.

Things are still difficult, but the Cancer and Work service seems flexible and really centred on my individual needs. They have helped me with my confidence, and to think about my abilities and interests. This has led to me exploring my potential again and I have contacted employment support services that they have recommended. I realise that, through the years, my vocational needs have lagged behind my other needs. In a way, what I needed was an adult version of CCLASP. My aim is to get back on track and to give something back. In time, I hope to get a full-time job. ■

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James Kirk

The **Macmillan Work Service** operates a daily clinic at the **Edinburgh Cancer Centre**, Western General Hospital, **Monday to Friday from 10am to 1pm**.
For more information or advice, please come to our clinic, call **0131 537 9579** or email **voc.rehab@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk**