



**WORKING TO
WELLBEING™**

Maria's Breast Cancer Story

Early intervention supporting a safe and confident return to work during cancer recovery.



Maria was diagnosed with breast cancer in April 2023 and what followed was an intense and deeply personal period of treatment, uncertainty and recovery. Alongside the physical impact of chemotherapy and surgery, she was also navigating the emotional strain of a life altering diagnosis and the prospect of returning to work.

Maria worked intermittently during her treatment and was off work from November 2023. She underwent chemotherapy between July and November, followed by a double mastectomy with lymph node clearance in December. Further surgery was required in January after residual cancer was identified in additional lymph nodes. It was, in her words, an emotional rollercoaster.

In January 2024, Maria was referred to Working To Wellbeing for Vocational Rehabilitation Coaching by Aviva.

“Breast cancer can be very difficult to discuss with a male manager, and there was no real support from HR about my return or during my phased return. I immediately clicked with my coach and felt at ease. It was an emotional rollercoaster for me but with their support I was able to return to work very quickly after my surgery, during radiotherapy and adapting to preventative medication. I cannot fault them, they were amazing.”

At initial assessment, Maria was experiencing:

- Pain and cording in her upper limbs, restricting her range of movement and affecting her sleep.
- Physical and cognitive fatigue
- Low mood
- Anxiety
- Significant functional limitation.
- Physical activity levels were low and everyday tasks felt demanding.

Over the course of several follow up sessions, alongside employer engagement, her coach provided combined return to work planning and therapeutic support. This included activity planning, fatigue management, pacing strategies, emotional support, and close liaison with her employer to ensure a safe and sustainable return.

Maria returned to work in February 2024 on a phased basis. With structured support and careful monitoring of symptoms, she gradually increased her hours and responsibilities. By October 2024, she had successfully progressed to four days per week, working 30 hours.

The impact of the intervention is reflected in her outcome measures, demonstrating improvements with fatigue and function improving. Although mild anxiety was present at discharge, this was managed with coping strategies and ongoing support.

Maria continues to manage the on-going effects of her cancer treatment. However, she now does so with confidence, self management strategies and an established work routine that supports her health.

Reflecting on her journey, Maria shared:

“I would have gone with what I thought was right and crashed and burned” without the referral from Aviva to Working To Wellbeing.

“They were absolutely fantastic, without them I would not feel like I do today. My coach was my go-to person when I needed support emotionally and with her medical background, she understood everything.”

Maria's story highlights the importance of a timely intervention where her insurance provider Aviva referred her to Working To Wellbeing for specialist vocational rehabilitation following cancer treatment. With the right clinical expertise, emotional support and employer engagement, individuals can return to meaningful work even during ongoing treatment and recovery. For Maria, work is no longer a source of anxiety but part of her recovery and resilience.