

# How Does a Cancer Diagnosis, Impact Career Development and Decision Making in Scotland

## ABSTRACT

Cancer is a significant health issue, with one in two people in the UK diagnosed in their lifetime. This study explores the impact of a cancer diagnosis on career development in Scotland, focusing on how it influences career decisions and the role of career guidance in supporting individuals post-diagnosis. Existing research primarily examines the social and psychological aspects of cancer, how cancer affects career development in a Scottish context is yet to be fully explored.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five cancer survivors from the Western Isles. Three key themes emerged: career resilience and adaptability, the impact of cancer on professional identity and career trajectories, and challenges in returning to work.

Findings show that survivors develop resilience and adaptability by re-evaluating their career goals and priorities, often moving to more flexible roles to better fit health needs and changed priorities. A cancer diagnosis can also affect professional identity, leading many to reassess self-perception and career goals, with many forced to change careers or adjust work arrangements. Survivors also face challenges returning to work, including inadequate workplace adaptations and anxieties over disclosing cancer histories during job applications.

This study highlights the need for holistic career guidance that addresses these challenges and empowers survivors to create meaningful, sustainable career plans. Further research is needed to understand the long-term impact of cancer and career development and gain insights into the Scottish context.

## CONTACT

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## PERSONAL INTEREST

As a Career Development Professional working with clients across different ages and stages in their lives, I have noticed an increase in adult clients seeking support to return to work, having been out of work for some time after experiencing ill health and some looking to change careers after their own personal health experiences. In speaking to clients, it became apparent that there was very little support offered when faced with making decisions about work, and no referrals to career guidance services.

It's not just adult clients. In schools, young people are often impacted by a parent's or sibling's ill health, affecting their own wellbeing, academic performance, and career decisions.

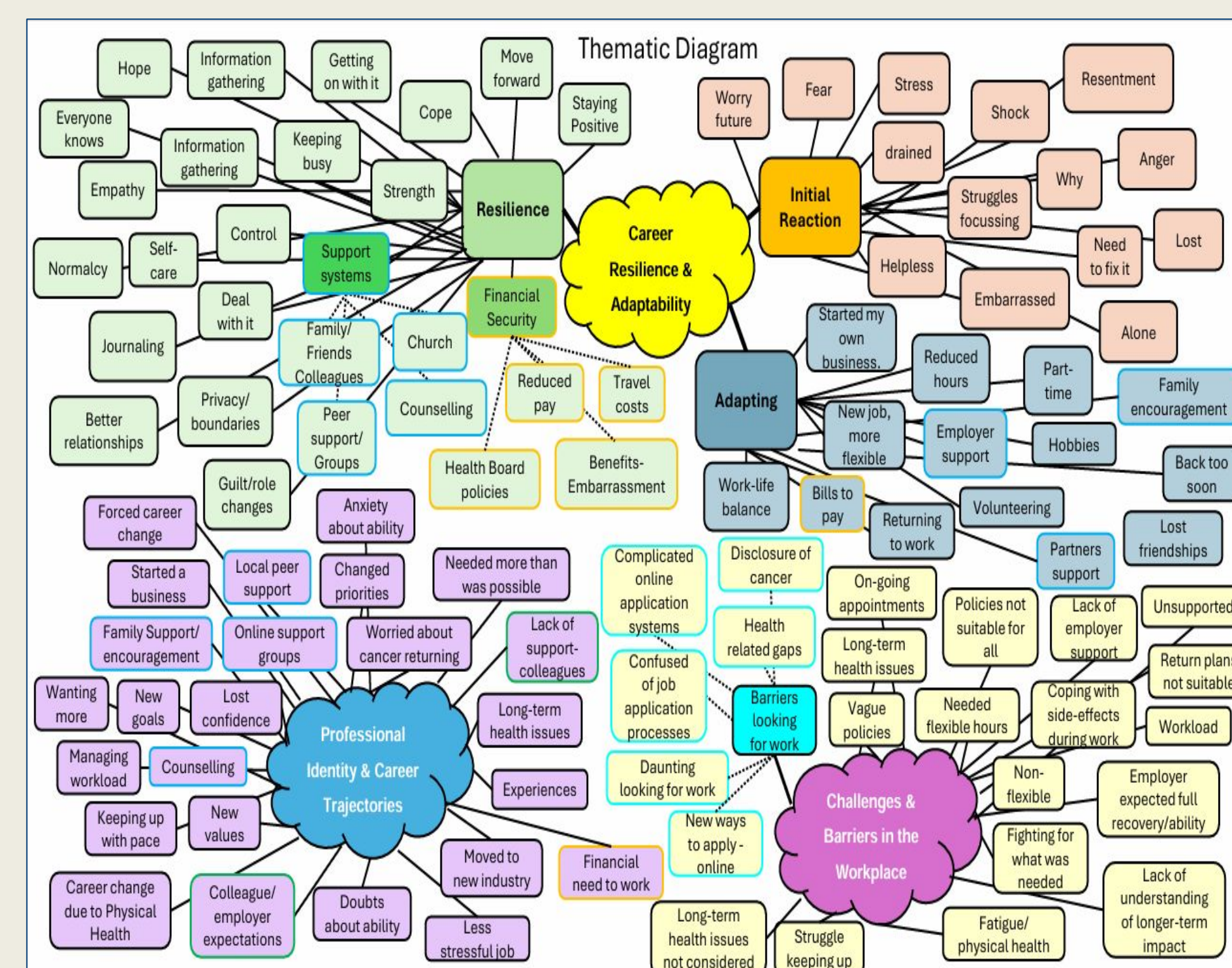
## METHODS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research used an IPA approach. Data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with five working-age individuals with a history of cancer, living in the Western Isles of Scotland. Recruitment was via local advertising or charity groups supporting individuals with cancer. Data was transcribed and analysed using IPA to identify key themes on how cancer influences career decisions and development. See Diagram 1.

### Research Questions:

In a Scottish context, how might a cancer diagnosis impact career development, and how do individuals navigate career decisions post-diagnosis?

How could career guidance support individuals' post-diagnosis in addressing associated career shocks or traumas, and making sense of complex career adjustments?



## KEY FINDINGS

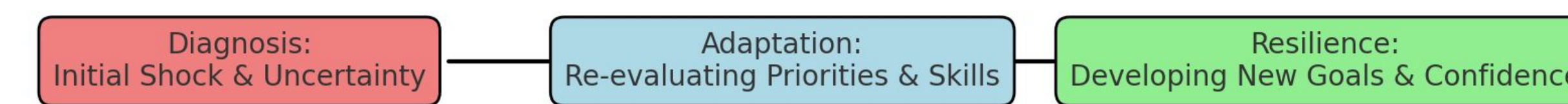
### 1. Career Resilience and Adaptability

Participants rebuilt their careers by developing resilience, re-evaluating priorities, and adapting to unexpected career shocks, often prioritising flexibility and work-life balance over previous career aspirations.

#### Key points:

- Participants experienced sudden career shocks, leading them to shift focus from career growth to flexibility and balance.
- New skills, such as communication and negotiation, often developed unconsciously through navigating medical, workplace, and financial adjustments.

*"When I heard cancer, [...] I just felt drained [...] but over time, I rebuilt my confidence." (Participant 4)*



### 2. Economic Challenges and Career Adjustments

Financial pressures led to compromises, with participants prioritising stability over aspirations.

#### Key points:

- Rural participants faced high out of pocket expenses as well as significant additional travel costs, often exceeding compensation limits.
- Many moved into lower-paying or part-time roles to accommodate health needs.

*"I had a lot of pressure to go back [to work] before I was ready [...] we had the mortgage, the car, and other things." (Participant 2)*



Diagram 3. Economic challenges

### 3. Family Dynamics in Career Decisions

Family support was crucial in helping participants navigate recovery and career decisions, but it also shifted household dynamics.

#### Key points:

- Spouses provided emotional and financial support, allowing survivors to focus on recovery.
- Family members experienced career changes or challenges, such as taking on additional work or adjusting their roles to provide caregiving support.
- Participants described guilt around increased dependence on their families.

*"My husband's support was incredible. Not just like, emotionally but he just, took on all the financial stuff, working extra shifts to help us make ends meet while I focused on getting better." (Participant 3)*



Diagram 4. Family Support

## PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

A holistic approach to career guidance is key, particularly for clients navigating the career shocks and disruptions that can follow a cancer diagnosis. Many individuals face an abrupt loss of professional confidence or have to make difficult career compromises due to ongoing health needs.

Career practitioners play a key role in helping clients make sense of these career shocks, supporting them to identify transferable skills, secure workplace accommodations, and explore sustainable career options.

There is also a need to advocate for better integration of career guidance within health and recovery services, ensuring individuals do not have to navigate these transitions alone.

Further research is needed to explore the broader career impacts of cancer, particularly how career shocks influence long-term career recovery and employment. This should include different regions and demographics, as well as the wider implications for family members navigating career adjustments while supporting loved ones.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

**Cancer can significantly alter career paths, but it doesn't have to limit opportunities.**

Let's start the conversation, how can we, as career professionals, ensure that career guidance becomes a recognised part of cancer recovery?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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