

## Back to School After Treatment for Brain Tumour

*I was diagnosed with a brain tumour in 2009 and finished my chemo and radiation a year ago. I feel great and I want to go back to school to finish my degree. How can I plan for a successful return to school?*

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When you consider the demands of university, it is important to give yourself the best chance for success. It is not always clear how a brain tumor or its treatment will affect a person's ability to learn and cope with the demands at university/college. A brain tumor or treatment for a tumor may result in changes in your thinking abilities, such as impairments in short-term memory, attention and concentration. You may also find changes in your physical capacities, such as a lower energy level, muscle weakness, decreased vision and hearing and changes in mobility. If you are only noticing problems with fatigue, I would suggest going back to school part time initially. This gives you time to catch up, re-orient yourself to school and if needed bring your energy back slowly. However if you notice other changes in function that might have a negative impact on learning at school, I would recommend the following:

**Assessment:** An important consideration when returning to school is your physical and cognitive abilities. If you or others have noticed any physical and mental/cognitive changes, you might want to discuss with your doctor. It is important to assess if what you are experiencing is expected and whether it is likely to continue. The doctor can discuss with you what to expect in terms of recovery time or whether these changes might continue and if there are options (referral to rehabilitation) to improve function. In the case of having changes in cognition (i.e. reduced ability to concentrate, attend, remember, sort out new problems, stay on task or multitask, avoid distractions) a neuropsychology assessment is the best way to pinpoint subtle cognitive problems that might be a problem when learning complex information that may be required as part of university/course work. Neuropsychology assessments assist in identifying what is easy or difficult for you to do and provides guidance on what needs to be in place at the school to help you learn in the best possible way.

**Where can I get a neuropsychology assessment?** Some rehabilitation hospitals provide neuropsychology services. These can also be funded privately. Alternatively, psycho-educational assessments may also use neuropsychological assessment tools, and you can apply for such funding support (if you qualify for student aide) for such assessments through StudentAidBC ([https://studentaidbc.ca/explore/grants-scholarships/learning-disability-assessment-bursary#Am\\_I\\_eligible?](https://studentaidbc.ca/explore/grants-scholarships/learning-disability-assessment-bursary#Am_I_eligible?)). If you have questions about accessing learning disability assessment grants contact the disability advisor at your post-secondary institution. The

provincial program WorkBC <https://www.workbc.ca/WorkBC-Centres.aspx> may fund a psycho-educational assessment if required to determine a suitable career path or job.

If you have physical challenges that might affect your ability to get to classes, see course materials, hear lectures, or write notes, an assessment by a specialist (eye specialist, hearing specialist, physiotherapist/kinesologist/occupational therapist) can be used to identify your strengths and challenges and offer ideas on how to things easier or suggest rehabilitation to improve function.

**Rehabilitation:** As mentioned university/college can be demanding and it make sense to make sure you are able to function at the best of your abilities. For example, if you have difficulty with weakness in your legs or arms working with a physiotherapist might be helpful to improve strength. Working with an occupational therapist might help you figure out what ability aides might help you get to your classes on time. If you notice you get tired easier, working with an occupational therapist might give you idea on how to pace yourself or make sure that your energy peaks during school times so that you can get the most from instruction. If you have visual problems, working with a visual rehabilitation specialist might give you some ideas about some technical aids ( i.e. computer software with large print or voice programs). As mentioned a neuropsychology guidance might help you figure the best learning styles as well as learning compensatory strategies to help learn things and faster and easier. Assessment and assistance from rehabilitation professionals can also help with the next step, which is obtaining accommodations for these changes at your university/college. For both cognitive and physical challenges it is important to talk to your doctor and get a referral to medical and rehabilitative services to assess and improve your abilities.

**Support for Accommodation:** Post-secondary institutions have services for those recovering from illness or that have a disability through the disability department. The disability department is responsible for providing accommodations for students with disabilities. An accommodation plan is put in place for students based on the medical assessment(s) they provide regarding their disability/illness. Medical assessments are required and if there are questions regarding the process it is important to contact the disability office at the post-secondary institution you are attending to get the most accurate information. Based on the information provided in your assessments, dialogue with you, and consulting with professionals, accommodations are put in place to mitigate disability/illness related challenges a student may have while maintaining the academic standard of the institution. For example if you have challenges with physical abilities ensuring you have easy access to the class room, a seat close to the door, ensuring frequent breaks or the ability to leave class. If you have cognitive problems accommodations could include having a note taker, having more time to write an exam or complete essays, tape recording lectures and getting notes in advance. The disability department can also put you in touch with other resources available at your post-secondary institution such as counseling, financial services, and learning assistance. It is important to contact the disability department before you start school to put these accommodations in place. If things change for you or you are struggling with your courses it is important to contact the disability department to discuss your concerns. It is

recommended you initiate services approximately 3 months before starting school so they can set things up for you if needed (this time frame varies between post-secondary institutions). If there are any questions about the accommodation process and the necessary documentation/assessments needed, contact the disability department at your post-secondary institution.

**Financial Support:** Another good reason to contact the disability supports departments at university/college is find out about the financial support might be available to you. There may be scholarship specific to that school and there are some scholarships available to those with specific types of disabilities. <http://www.disabilityawards.ca/?lang=EN>. As well, the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada has a Youth Education Award (for those diagnosed with a brain tumour before age 25 years <http://www.braintumour.ca/4472/education-awards>). Other scholarships for childhood cancer survivors include a scholarship through the Childhood Cancer Foundation of Canada <http://www.childhoodcancer.ca/get-help/survivor-scholarship-program> and additional scholarships for those who are entering medicine, health sciences or pharmacy. If you were treated through B.C. Children's Hospital you can apply for Balding for Dollars [http://www.baldingfordollars.com/docs/BFD\\_BursaryApplication0312.pdf](http://www.baldingfordollars.com/docs/BFD_BursaryApplication0312.pdf) If you are coping with a disability you may be eligible from support through StudentAidBC [www.StudenAidBC.ca](http://www.StudenAidBC.ca). Other helpful scholarship, grants a bursary information websites include: <https://yconic.com/money-for-school> and <http://www.scholarshipscanada.com/>

If you would like for information about preparing for university/college or require assistance and advocacy in obtaining assessment, rehabilitation or accommodations, please contact Maureen Parkinson, M.Ed. C.C.R.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor 604-877-6000 local 2189 or 1-800-663-3333 local 2189.

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