

Managing cancer in the workplace



Guidance for employers and workmates

This Information Sheet gives advice on how to help an employee or workmate with cancer.

What happens when a worker is diagnosed with cancer

Just as a diagnosis of cancer has an impact on the life of the person diagnosed, those who work with them may also be affected. The following suggestions are for managers and workmates.

Typical reactions when hearing that an employee or a workmate has cancer are shock, disbelief, and concern for the person.

Hearing the news of another's cancer diagnosis may raise questions about your own health – "If this can happen to my workmate perhaps it could happen to me too". It may be a reminder of a past cancer experience – something they would rather not think of at work.

Workmates may be concerned about having to take on extra workload. Sometimes anxieties, such as worrying about saying the wrong thing makes it difficult to talk. Workmates often avoid talking to the person diagnosed at a time when the person most needs support.

Managers may feel a sense of guilt that they failed to realise that an employee was not well.

Cancer is now openly talked about. However; even though many see cancer as a death sentence many people are still cured or live for a long time.

Guidance for managers

1. The privacy of your employee is vital. Ask who in the workplace they want told about their diagnosis and treatment.
2. Be practical – ensure they have all the information they need about their rights as an employee, full details of their leave, any insurance cover that may apply, or details of employee benefits they may be entitled to. If treatment for cancer results in a period of sick leave, offer to develop a 'return to work plan' with your employee.
3. Be aware of cancer-related fatigue (extreme tiredness with changing periods of tiredness and energy). This is a common experience for many people with cancer. It may be due to the effects of cancer treatment or the cancer itself. It can interfere with the person's ability to do their work.
4. Cancer and treatments can result in temporary difficulties with things, such as memory, doing many things at the same time and being able to concentrate. If these after-effects happen, a return to work plan can provide ways to cope. Try not to say things such as, "Have you always been forgetful?" Instead, work with the employee to find ways to reduce these temporary side-effects on their work.

5. Be flexible when planning with your employee. For example, they may still be able to carry on their work while having treatment. Perhaps they could do some work from home, or reduce their hours to fit in with treatment and other appointments. Could they work different hours to fit in with their peak energy times? Is job-sharing an option? Talk with other staff affected by these changes before organising them.
6. Be aware that your employee may need to avoid strong smells in the workplace, such as lunchroom smells, strong perfume or aftershave, or chemical products. These may cause nausea (feeling sick), particularly if they are having chemotherapy.
7. Giving them a car park close to the workplace may be helpful while they are coping with having less energy.
8. Be open and honest. This will be appreciated, and allows your employee to feel comfortable expressing their feelings. It will allow them to be honest about what duties they are able to do. Encourage them to ask for help when they need it.
9. Ensure your employee knows who they can talk to with any concerns, for example, the local EAP (employee assistance programme) service; an industrial chaplain linked to your workplace; or other counselling services available to them, such as the Cancer Society's.
10. Ask your employee who you can contact should they be unwell at work.
11. Do not reduce the workload without talking with your employee. This can make them feel powerless and may add stress to other workers who have to pick up the extra work.
12. Involve the employee in handing over their workload. Assist them to re-think their goals.
13. It is important to manage the needs of the organisation and your own goals as manager alongside the needs of the employee.
14. With their permission, it may be helpful to arrange an education session for staff about cancer. Such a session should be general in nature and may help to dispel some myths and concerns people have. Learning more about how different cancer treatments affect people could be helpful. It can be an opportunity to introduce some concepts of healthy lifestyles within the workplace. There may be an occupational health nurse you can call on to deliver this session. Talk to your local Cancer Society for advice.
15. Be aware that the employee will be going through an unhappy time. For some this results in mood changes that can be hard to cope with and can cause tension in the workplace.
16. Talk to them regularly to find out how they are managing. Making a regular appointment to talk about their work has worked well for some. This can be a useful part of a return to work plan.
17. Do not dwell on cancer – work can be a diversion. Some people with cancer have said they welcomed returning to work as it was a place where they did not have to think about cancer.
18. Be aware of how other staff in the workplace are coping. Ensure they have the right support if they have to take on extra work for a while.
19. Some employees attempt to return to full-time work too quickly. Some employers expect the employee to return too quickly to work. Employers, sometimes, over-protect cancer survivors. They may not know when staff are ready to begin taking on their responsibilities again.

Guidance for workmates

1. Check with your workmates if they wish to talk about their cancer at all. Some people prefer never to talk about their personal lives at work while others will appreciate the opportunity. Keep conversations confidential – assume you cannot talk to others about things your workmate has shared with you unless they give permission.

2. Be aware of cancer-related fatigue (see point 3. on the first page).
3. Ask your workmate if they would like one person to update others on how things are going. This will ensure the person will not be interrupted by well-meaning people. This also avoids the person being over-loaded by questions.
4. Do not withdraw from your workmate if you have had a close working relationship. They will appreciate your support and presence. If their situation raises difficult issues for you, for example, a personal experience with cancer, it may help to discuss how you are feeling with your manager or another workmate.
5. Try to avoid saying "You're brave". This may add to their stress – feeling they have to perform well at work and be seen to be coping.
6. It is not your job to cheer the person up. Do not jump in and become a rescuer. Always check first if your workmate wishes to share some duties, or offer to discuss this with your manager.
7. When your workmate returns to work, do not overload them. Welcome them back (a note or 'welcome back' card is often appreciated). Acknowledge their cancer but do not dwell on it. Tell them you would like to listen if they need you to, and try to resume your normal way of working as soon as possible.
8. The social aspect of the workplace is often what your workmate has missed if they have been in hospital or recovering at home. Remember to include them in the usual work social activities.
9. Do not expect them to return to their old selves. Surviving cancer or living with a terminal illness are both 'extreme' experiences. Your workmate may be changed by what they have been through. This change may not be for the better or worse, but simply something different.

Websites to visit for more information

Cancer and Careers:
www.cancerandcareers.org/

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"Working while caring for someone with cancer"