

Supporting a colleague with cancer

A guide for co-workers

The news that a colleague has been diagnosed with cancer can be a shock. Co-workers may experience a variety of emotions including disbelief, fear, anxiety, concern and sadness. It may be particularly confronting for co-workers who have experienced cancer in someone close to them or had cancer themselves.

This fact sheet has been produced to help co-workers who wish to be supportive of their colleague after a cancer diagnosis, but are unsure about what to say or do.

Communicating with your colleague

Many people diagnosed with cancer will appreciate the concern and support of their co-workers. Some people may feel comfortable talking to co-workers about their diagnosis. Others will prefer not to discuss it at all. It is best to take your cue from the person with cancer.

It is natural for co-workers to feel awkward or helpless, and to be afraid of saying the wrong thing. What you say will depend on your relationship with your colleague, how often you interact with them and your own experience of cancer.

Tips for talking with a colleague with cancer



Helpful ideas

- ✓ Ask whether your colleague wants to discuss the cancer, and respect their response.
- ✓ Make time to listen. Your colleague may appreciate the opportunity to talk about their feelings, fears, treatment, side effects, finances or other concerns.
- ✓ Every now and then, ask how your colleague is feeling that day.
- ✓ Respect your colleague's privacy. It's best not to ask personal questions, such as the person's prognosis.
- ✓ Keep the news confidential. Ask permission before sharing details of the person's health with others.
- ✓ Talk about other things too. Just because a person has cancer doesn't mean they want to talk about it all the time. It's okay to chat about other things happening in both your lives.
- ✓ Ask if they need any practical help at work or, if it is appropriate, at home.
- ✓ Show that you care with small gestures such as a card or flowers.

What is less helpful

- ✗ Asking questions about lifestyle choices such as smoking. You might think that the cancer was caused by your colleague's lifestyle choices, but that is often not the case. And no-one deserves cancer.
- ✗ Sharing stories about other people with cancer you may have known. Everyone's situation is different.
- ✗ Offering unsolicited advice about your colleague's treatment or choices.
- ✗ Talking about fighting cancer. This may make people feel like they're losing.
- ✗ Making observations on how your colleague looks. This may make the person feel self-conscious.
- ✗ Saying clichés or unrealistic assurances. Even though you might mean to be reassuring, saying "don't worry" or "be positive" may seem dismissive of how the person is feeling.
- ✗ Making comments that indicate you are worried or scared about catching cancer from your colleague. Cancer is not contagious and these sorts of comments can make your colleague feel isolated.

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How can I help?

Sometimes co-workers want to help, but are not sure what to do. At the same time, the person with cancer may be uncomfortable asking for help. Here are some easy ways to show support.

Keep in touch

As cancer can be isolating, your colleague may appreciate hearing from you if they're taking time off. Ask them if they want to be kept up to date with work and social events. Consider nominating one contact person who maintains the flow of good wishes and information in both directions.

Offer practical assistance

People often say, "Let me know if I can do anything to help". A specific offer of help can make it easier for the person to accept your support and means they don't have to think of what you could do. The box below contains some suggestions for you to consider.

Financial help may also be welcome

A group of workmates might choose to donate money or fundraise to reduce financial stress. For example, the money could be used to purchase taxi vouchers so the colleague with cancer can get to treatment easily, or to pay for a cleaner before they come home from hospital, or to pay for childminding or a meal service.

Ways to help at work

Offer to cover some tasks

Volunteer to help if the manager needs to redistribute some of your colleague's usual workload. Arrange with your colleague to discuss any appointments or upcoming tasks.

Treat your colleague as normal as possible

Avoid smothering them with concern. You can ask if they would prefer you to check-in about the cancer regularly or just to wait until they bring up the topic.

Expect treatment side effects to change how your colleague feels

They may feel tired, find it difficult to concentrate or feel nauseous. Try to be patient and understanding if your colleague is not able to work as efficiently or in the same way as before. Keep in mind that these side effects may continue for some time after treatment ends.

Stay home or keep your distance if you have a cold or other contagious illness

People undergoing some kinds of cancer treatment may be especially susceptible to infections.

Volunteer to be a workplace buddy or mentor for your colleague

This may be appropriate if you have personally experienced cancer yourself.

Ways to stay in touch

- ✓ Send a card or flowers.
- ✓ Telephone, text, email or use social networking sites to make contact.
- ✓ Visit your colleague in hospital (check if they would like a visit first).
- ✓ Catch up over a weekly coffee if your colleague feels up to it.
- ✓ Include your colleague in social events – even if the person isn't well enough to come, it's nice to be asked and it will help them to stay in touch.
- ✓ Be sensitive to your colleague's situation in any communications you have.

Practical ways to help

- ✓ Cook a meal or set up a team roster to provide meals.
- ✓ Mind children while the person is at treatment.
- ✓ Look after your colleague's pet.
- ✓ Drive the person to treatment.
- ✓ Shop for groceries.
- ✓ Help with small household tasks such as weeding the garden or cleaning.
- ✓ Offer to organise a get-together with workmates if your colleague is up to it.
- ✓ Organise a blood drive to donate blood if your colleague needs blood transfusions.



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Looking after yourself

It's natural to feel a range of emotions in response to your colleague's diagnosis. If you feel overwhelmed, it may help to:

- talk to your manager or mentor about how you are feeling
- speak to your co-workers and check in with them
- ask your general practitioner (GP) for a referral to counselling
- access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (if offered by your employer).

Don't forget the carers

Colleagues caring for a family member or friend with cancer may appreciate your support. They may find the suggestions in this fact sheet useful.

Where to get help and information

- **Cancer Council 13 11 20** – Call for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets on cancer treatments and side effects, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Council websites

ACT..... actcancer.org
 NSW cancercouncil.com.au
 NT nt.cancer.org.au
 QLD cancerqld.org.au
 SA..... cancersa.org.au
 TAS cancertas.org.au
 VIC cancervic.org.au
 WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
 Australia..... cancer.org.au

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Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided.



For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council 13 11 20. This is a confidential service.