

CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE

Co-worker Tip Sheet

For co-workers of employees diagnosed with cancer, in treatment and beyond

When a co-worker has cancer it can create stress, concern, sadness and uncertainty for the whole team. Cancer is a serious illness, but with additional support and time off, some people can work during their treatment. Others find that they need more rest or feel too sick to continue working and need to take a leave of absence. You can play an important role helping your co-worker prioritize her or his health by staying flexible about responsibilities and offering empathy.



GETTING THE NEWS

Focus on ways to support your co-worker and respect your colleague's privacy during this difficult time:

- **If you don't know what to say, you're not alone.** The most important thing to do is speak in a way that is comfortable for you and honest, expressing empathy, encouragement and support. For many people, having "normal" conversations instead of talking about cancer is helpful.
- **Try not to talk about fighting cancer or bravery, or comment on your co-worker's looks.** Some people feel like failures if their friends compare cancer to a battle because they may feel as if they're "losing." It's also easy to misinterpret appearance, assuming that if someone looks bad, their condition must be serious or vice versa. A comment about someone's looks could also lead to hurt feelings. Instead of commenting on appearance, ask your colleague how he or she is feeling.
- **Keep the news confidential.** It is up to the person with cancer to decide who knows about the diagnosis. Only share the news with people your co-worker has said it's OK to talk to.



SUPPORTING YOUR CO-WORKER WITH CANCER

There are many things you can do to support your co-worker during treatment:

- **Learn all you can about cancer.** A list of helpful resources is included at the end of this tip sheet.
- **Understand that a co-worker with cancer may have days when she or he does not feel well because of side effects from treatment.** Side effects can be physical or emotional and may affect how much your colleague is able to get done and how she or he interacts with people at work.
- **Be ready to step up to cover some tasks for your co-worker.** If your co-worker can work during treatment, she or he may need help completing tasks. When your colleague is out of the office, you may be asked to take on additional responsibilities to help cover her or his projects.
- **Don't lose your sense of humor around your co-worker.** As always, be appropriate about humor in the workplace, but a little levity goes a long way to helping people feel normal and happy.



Ask your co-worker how you can help. There are some things, like flowers and food types that people with certain cancers cannot have. For that reason, it is best to ask about any restrictions before making plans. Suggestions for appropriate gifts include:

- Cards or small gifts (socks, hats, hard candies);
- Help with household needs, such as meals, childcare or errands;
- An offer to donate sick or vacation time (if possible at your job); and
- An offer to throw a party when treatment is completed (with permission from the co-worker).



AFTER TREATMENT

After treatment ends, your co-worker may still need support. People whose cancer is in remission may still be going to regular follow-up appointments. Some people may require additional treatments to help keep their cancer from coming back. Be prepared to step in to assist your co-worker at times in the future, even if the initial treatment is over.



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

If you are feeling sad, anxious or stressed about your colleague's diagnosis, resources are available to help you as well.

- **Employee assistance programs are often free and may include counseling services or support groups.** To access these programs or find out more, talk to your supervisor or Human Resources.
- **Talk to your supervisor about workload concerns.** Taking on extra work when a co-worker has cancer can be difficult, especially if it's for long periods of time. Your supervisor needs to know if you're having a hard time managing additional responsibilities.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

American Cancer Society:

www.cancer.org or 1-800-227-2345

National Business Group on Health:

www.businessgrouphealth.org or 202-558-3000

The Jobs Accommodations Network (JAN):

<http://askjan.org/>

