Supporting a colleague with cancer

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

It is natural to feel awkward or helpless, but many people dealing with cancer will appreciate the support of their co-workers. For people having treatment or returning to work after treatment, the opportunity for social interaction and the regular routine that the workplace can provide may be important.

This fact sheet has been produced to help co-workers who wish to be supportive, but are unsure what to say or do.

Communicating well
Some people will be very open about their cancer and quite prepared to talk to co-workers about their diagnosis. Others, however, will prefer not to discuss it at all. It is best to follow the lead of the person with cancer.

It is natural for co-workers to feel that they don’t know what to say. Here are some tips about what might be helpful and what is less so:

• Be available to listen to the person. He or she may appreciate the opportunity to talk about his or her feelings, fears, treatment, side effects, finances or other concerns. Make eye contact and try not to interrupt.
• Ask whether the person wants to discuss the cancer, and respect his or her response.
• Acknowledge that life can be unfair, and that bad things sometimes happen to good people.
• Every now and then, ask how the person is feeling that day.
• Respect the person’s privacy. It’s best not to ask personal questions, such as the person’s prognosis. It is also important to ask permission before sharing details of the person’s health with other people.
• Try to withhold judgement. You might think that the cancer was caused by the person’s lifestyle choices, but that may not be the case.
• Don’t assure the person that “everything will be okay” or tell him or her “not to worry”. Even though they are well meant, these kinds of statements can seem dismissive of the person’s concerns, and may be unrealistic. Similarly, telling a person to “be positive” may make the person feel pressured to put on a happy face for the sake of everyone else.
• Refrain from offering unsolicited advice about the person’s treatment or choices.
• Avoid sharing horror stories about other people with cancer.

How can I help?
Sometimes co-workers may want to do something practical 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 help:

Keep in touch
Cancer can be isolating, so if your colleague is taking time off for treatment, he or she may appreciate hearing from you. Ask if the person wants 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.

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Other ways to stay in touch

- Send a card or flowers.
- Telephone, text, email or use social networking sites to make contact.
- Visit the person in hospital (check if your colleague is up to a visit first).
- Remember to 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 him or her to stay in touch.

Do something practical

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.

There are many practical ways to help. Here are a few ideas:

- cook a meal
- mind children while the person is at treatment
- look after the person’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 friends if the person is up to it.

Financial help may also be welcome. A group of workmates might choose to donate money or fundraise to assist with a financial stress. For example, donated money could be used to purchase taxi vouchers to enable the person to get to treatment easily, or to pay for a cleaner before the person comes home from hospital.

At work

- Talk about topics other than cancer. Just because a person has cancer doesn’t mean that he or she is no longer interested in football, the latest movie or current affairs.
- It may be that the manager will need to redistribute some of your colleague’s normal workload, so taking on some extra duties for a while may be helpful.

- Try to keep the way you interact with the person as normal as possible. Avoid smothering him or her with concern. You may want to ask if your colleague would prefer you to check in regularly or just to talk about the cancer when he or she feels like it.

- Cancer treatment can have physical side effects such as fatigue and poor concentration, so try to be patient and understanding if the person is not able to work as efficiently or in the same way as previously. Keep in mind that these side effects may continue for some time after the person’s treatment is complete.

- People undergoing some kinds of cancer treatment may be especially susceptible to infections, so stay home or keep your distance if you have a cold or other contagious illness.

- If you have personally experienced cancer yourself, you may like to talk to your manager about offering your services as a workplace mentor for your colleague.

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 be beneficial to speak to someone.

Talk to your manager or mentor about how you are feeling. Some organisations offer employees access to counselling through an Employee Assistance Program. Your GP can also refer you to counselling.

Don’t forget the carers

Colleagues who are caring for a loved one with cancer may also appreciate your support, and the suggestions in this fact sheet can also be applied to them.

Further information

- Cancer Council website
  www.cancer.org.au
- Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20
- Cancer Council How Can I Help? brochure