

Supporting a colleague with cancer

A guide for co-workers

The news that a colleague has been diagnosed with cancer can be a big shock. 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.

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

Communication

Many people dealing with cancer will appreciate the concern and support of their co-workers. 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 awkward, embarrassed 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	Things to avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be available to listen. Your colleague may appreciate the opportunity to talk about their feelings, fears, treatment, side effects, finances or other concerns. ✓ Be sensitive to your colleague's feelings, make eye contact and try not to interrupt. ✓ Ask whether your colleague wants to discuss the cancer, and respect their response. ✓ Acknowledge that life can be unfair and that bad things sometimes happen to good people. ✓ Every now and then, ask how your colleague is feeling that day. Make time to listen to and acknowledge what they have to say. ✓ Respect your colleague'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. ✓ Talk about topics other than cancer. Just because a person has cancer doesn't mean that they are no longer interested in football, the latest movie or current affairs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Try to withhold judgement. You might think that the cancer was caused by your colleague's lifestyle choices, but that is often not the case. ✗ Avoid sharing horror stories about other people with cancer you may have known. ✗ Refrain from offering unsolicited advice about your colleague's treatment or choices. ✗ Avoid making observations about how your colleague is looking. ✗ Don't tell your colleague to "be positive". This may make the person feel pressured to put on a happy face for others, no matter what the person is going through. ✗ Don't assure your colleague that "everything will be okay" or tell them "not to worry". Even when well meant, these kinds of statements can seem dismissive of the person's concerns and may be unrealistic. ✗ Avoid 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 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 show support.

- **Keep in touch** – Cancer can be isolating, so if your colleague is taking time off for treatment, they may appreciate hearing from you. 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.
- **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. 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 assist with a financial stress. For example, the money could be used to purchase taxi vouchers so the person can get to treatment easily, or to pay for a cleaner before the person comes home from hospital, or to pay for child minding or a meal service.

Ways to help at work

- It may be that the manager will need to redistribute some of your colleague’s usual workload, so taking on some extra duties for a while may be helpful. Make arrangements with your colleague to discuss any appointments or upcoming tasks.
- Try to keep the way you interact with the person as normal as possible. Avoid smothering them 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 they feel like it.
- Cancer treatment can have physical side effects such as fatigue and poor concentration, so 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 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 buddy or mentor for your colleague.

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 friends 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. It's human nature to want to try and fix things. Remember that it's okay to not have all the answers. If you feel overwhelmed, it may be beneficial to speak to someone. You could:

- talk to your manager or mentor about how you are feeling
- ask your GP for a referral to counselling
- receive counselling through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (if offered by your employer).

Don't forget the carers

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

Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 – for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can also ask for free copies of our booklets, 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
- Queensland..... cancerqld.org.au
- SA..... cancersa.org.au
- Tasmania cancertas.org.au
- Victoria cancervic.org.au
- WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
- Australia cancer.org.au

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. 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 in this fact sheet.



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