

Supporting a Colleague suffering from illness

When a colleague is diagnosed with a serious or life-threatening illness such as breast cancer, bowel cancer, or cardiovascular disease, it can deeply affect the individual and their workplace, particularly if people don't know how to respond and show empathy. Some people prefer not to say anything to the impacted colleague out of fear of saying the wrong thing, or because they assume types of coping and privacy that may not be accurate.

Two things are critical when supporting a colleague: acknowledging their illness, and allowing them to inform you of the ways they need to be supported. So ignoring their illness and reducing the ways in which you interact with them after a diagnosis is not considered supportive at a time when empathy, flexibility and respect are required. The following information may help to ensure compassionate support for your colleague:

1 Foster Open, Respectful Communication
Every person's experience with illness is different. Some colleagues may want to talk openly about their diagnosis, while others may prefer privacy. Allow the individual to lead the conversation. A simple, sincere offer — such as *"I'm here if you want to talk or need anything"* — can go a long way. Avoid prying or making assumptions about their health or prognosis.

2 Offer Practical Support
Practical support can make a meaningful difference. This could include adjusting workloads, offering remote or flexible working arrangements, or helping to coordinate time off for treatment and recovery. For someone undergoing chemotherapy or recovering from surgery, fatigue and fluctuating health are common. Understanding their needs without judgment helps reduce stress.

3 Educate Yourself and Your Team
Learning about conditions like cancer and cardiovascular disease can help foster a supportive environment. Basic awareness of common side effects, such as fatigue, pain, or cognitive changes (sometimes called *"chemo brain"*), allows teams to show informed compassion. It also helps avoid potentially insensitive comments or unrealistic expectations.

4 Be Inclusive, Not Pitying
Avoid isolating a colleague by treating them only as *"the person with cancer"* or *"the one who had a heart attack."* Invite them to team activities when relevant and appropriate and continue to include them in work decisions. At the same time, respect their need for space or time away from the workplace.

5 Plan for the Long Term
Recovery from serious illness often continues long after initial treatment ends. Survivors of cancer may live with chronic fatigue or the psychological impact of their experience. People with cardiovascular disease may require ongoing care. Stay open to ongoing accommodations and support reintegration at a pace that works for them.

Ultimately, a thoughtful, human-centered approach can make a profound difference. By offering compassion, kindness and respect, workplaces can support employees not only in illness but in their journey toward recovery and dignity.

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