Supporting a worker with a serious illness

The serious illness of a co-worker can shake the foundations of a workplace, touch the lives of people and affect the dynamics, productivity and atmosphere. People often find they are unprepared to deal with their own unexpected feelings in reaction to their co-worker's illness and are unsure of how they can be of help.



When faced with this difficult situation, people leaders have an opportunity to create a workplace that is supportive and safe for a sick employee as well as those affected by their illness. Take the lead in supporting an ill employee and your staff with the suggestions below.

At diagnosis

When someone is ill and waiting for test results, the best way to be a source of comfort is to lend an ear and your support. Listen to their worries and let your colleague know you are concerned and that your thoughts are focused on a full recovery.

The diagnosis of a serious illness is difficult for anyone and can stir up a range of emotions. Understand that feelings such as anger and fear are normal and okay. A person diagnosed with a serious illness may feel:

- Shocked
- Worried, scared or anxious
- Guilty
- Lonely
- Sad or hopeless
- Angry

Keep in mind that people with chronic illnesses are often tired or, are dealing with physical pain on top of the emotional strain of diagnosis. Other difficulties, such as financial or family strain, can further weigh down an already difficult situation. Acknowledge this stress and be there to lend a supportive ear and a hand.

Communicating in the Workplace

The illness of an employee in the workplace can cause confusion and gossip when information is not communicated properly. Everyone involved will be affected by the illness of the co-worker, both emotionally and, potentially, with respect to workload. As a people leader, be sure to respect the privacy of your employee while encouraging open lines of communication between you and employees. Create a balance between sharing information and the colleague's privacy by:

- **Respecting the worker's space.** Don't divulge information that the ill employee does not wish to share. Keep the personal and medical status of your employees confidential, unless they ask you to update co-workers on specific information. Only share what you are asked to share by the employee. Read up on your workplace's policies and practices regarding employee information and illness in the workplace.

- **Encouraging colleagues to speak up.** The illness of an employee can affect certain tasks and may require employees to share or increase their workload. Encourage your employees to discuss their emotions and ideas around sharing the extra work, or any other work-related issues related to the illness or absence of an individual.

- **Having a point person** to act as a liaison with the unwell co-worker—whether it's you or a colleague he or she is especially close with—to communicate information to be shared such as treatment updates, whether the worker wishes to have visitors, or any way colleagues can be of help, etc.

Staying connected

Sometimes people shy away from interaction with someone who is seriously ill because they don't know what to say or how to interact. Discuss and share the following tips for interacting with an ill co-worker with staff to ease the awkwardness and keep communication flowing.

- **Keep in touch** through phone calls or encouraging notes to remind your colleague that he or she is in your thoughts.
- **Follow the lead.** Let the person suffering from the illness lead the conversation. Listen to what he or she is (and isn't) saying and only offer advice if asked.
- **Take it day-to-day.** People suffering from a chronic or serious illness may want to talk about their condition one day and not the next. Don't be offended if your colleague seems quieter than usual or wants to be left alone. This is normal. Respect feelings and be ready to listen and be there when needed.
- **Give your full attention.** Turn off your cell phone and don't make plans to visit when you know it will be a "tight fit" into your schedule. It takes time to really listen and give someone your full attention. Also, make eye contact during your conversation and don't fidget. These can be signs you are uncomfortable or avoiding something.
- **Stay the same.** While the outlook of the co-worker suffering from the illness may have changed, he or she is still the same person you got to know before the diagnosis. Don't be a fair-weather friend: show the same level of commitment and friendship you did before the health issue arose.
- **Get comfortable with silence.** Can't find the words? Don't be afraid to let an awkward lull in the conversation happen. It's better and more real than empty chatter. Often a kind smile can say much more in the moment than words.
- **Embrace laughter.** Don't be afraid to tell a good joke or story at appropriate moments. It can take your colleague's mind off the illness and help keep spirits up.
- **What not to say.** Don't use phrases like "I know how you feel" unless you've had the same experience with the illness. Instead, ask "What are you feeling?"

A Helping Hand

Help your employees affected by the illness of their co-worker by discussing unique ways they can be of help. Remember, you are not only helping the individual, but their family and close friends affected by their illness. There are many ways you can assist and positively impact the life of a chronically ill colleague during this difficult time. Make a difference by:

- **Staying informed.** Preferences vary from one person to the next. Some people want to know everything about their illness, while others only want to learn facts on a "need to know" basis. Researching the illness, treatment options, and support services available for the ill person are all practical ways to help and show support.
- **Thinking outside the box.** Weakness or limited mobility caused by the illness can interfere with the completion of daily tasks. Help your colleague discover new ways to get things done. Look into grocery and medication delivery and additional community support services available in your area to help make your co-worker's "to do" list a little easier.
- **Ask.** Don't wait to be told what you can do for someone with an illness. Ask. Better yet, ask when you can do specific things, such as cut the lawn or baby sit. Making the first offer to help can make it easier for your colleague to accept your assistance.

When first diagnosed with an illness, many people receive a lot of initial care and support. This attention, however, can fade over time, especially if struggling with a chronic illness that spans months. The most important part about offering help is in following through. It may be easy at first to be a support, but over

time, it can become more challenging to follow through on good intentions. Be constant and do what you say you'll do. Doing so, will help your colleague feel supported and valued during a very challenging life stage.