



Research • Educate • Support

It's difficult to know how to provide support to a colleague or employee who has been diagnosed with cancer. What is appropriate? What will not offend? Here's a list of approaches that could be useful.

Trying to find the right words?

What to say when a colleague has been diagnosed with cancer

"I think that feeling sad and/or scared is a reasonable response."

Not "Don't be sad or scared, you will get better."

"I don't know what is like to be in your shoes, but I will do my best to understand if you want to talk to me."

Not "I know how you feel" (not even you have or have had cancer – people respond differently).

"I don't know what I can do to help you, but I would like to assist you with some of your responsibilities."

"I have heard that one feels bad for some time after a treatment..."

...can I bring a meal to your home the evening after your treatment?"

... please take the time you need before you come to work."

... I am going to ask your colleagues to take on some of your responsibilities until you feel better."

"What is the one thing you need from me right now?"

Not "What can I do for you?" or "Can I do something for you?" (People going through a difficult time will more often not ask for help but will respond to a specific offer of help.)

"How has your day been so far?"

Not "How are you feeling?"

"It seems or it sounds like you are going through a tough time."

Not "Don't worry, you will feel better soon."

"It seems that you are having a tough day today, shall we go to the coffee shop and talk about it?"

Not "You know, it could be worse" or "It's not that bad" or "Don't worry, you'll be fine".

There are also other ways in which colleagues and employers can show that they care...

- Offer to lighten the workload of the person diagnosed with cancer.
- Send encouraging messages on the days that the person not at work. For example: "If you are not doing well, remember I am here to help or to talk to" or "I hope tomorrow will be a better day".
- Give the person a flower (favourite one if it is known) with an encouraging message tied to the flower. One flower with a message often means more than a bunch of flowers.
- Bring the person one of her/his favourite beverages or sweet treats that they are able to consume.
- When the person has to undergo treatment, such as chemotherapy, you can give them a gift, such as, sweets or mints to suck - sometimes chemotherapy leaves a bad aftertaste; ginger biscuits or ginger tea or mint tea – which help to alleviate nausea; books or magazines to read during treatment; a playlist of relaxation music; lip balm; hand cream; journalling materials; a cup with a reusable straw; non-slip socks; and puzzles.

Of course, the best gift will always be your time at work or even after hours. The care and support of colleagues and employers during a person's cancer journey are invaluable.

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