



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
October 2021

Cancer in the Workplace and How Supervisors Can Help

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Your employee has asked to speak with you privately, and it seems serious. Then, he confides in you he has cancer and your mind goes blank... What should you say? You are aware of HIPAA constraints and don't want to pry, but you start wondering about all the implications this could have at work. Is there a chance he won't return? What should you do now?

Cancer in the workplace can be especially complicated because it impacts companies on multiple levels: reduced productivity, coverage challenges, budgeting concerns, and the devastating toll it can take on a team as a colleague struggles with treatments, recovery, and even death.

According to the National Cancer Institute, cancer survival rates have been increasing over the past ten years as treatment has become more effective. This good news also means that people with cancer may work their way through treatment, so the likelihood of seeing an employee with cancer in the workplace is potentially high.

Cancer Lifeline identifies four primary needs of cancer patients: **1) information, 2) choice/control, 3) the ability to express feelings without judgement, and 4) inclusion rather than isolation.** As a supervisor, you can look to these foundational needs to guide you

as well as your HR professionals who have expertise with FMLA and other policies that will be helpful.

Considerations when developing your plan:

1. Ask the person where to talk about the diagnosis and with whom—private office, off-site?
2. Actively listen to the employee without judgement—don't give advice, just listen.
3. Validate the person's feelings and be supportive—communicate the person's value to the company/team, and acknowledge the difficulty of the situation.
4. Empower the employee to choose and control as much in the situation as possible:
 - Aside from HR, who else can know? Direct supervisor? Co-workers? Other staff?
 - How much information should be shared? Diagnosis only? Prognosis? Treatment plan?
 - If an employee only wants an immediate supervisor to know, what specifically should co-workers be told? Medical issue without details? Family crisis?
 - Ask what the person specifically needs—do not assume you know how to help.
 - Discuss the person's work responsibility concerns and reassure the employee that you will take care of the workload and not to worry.
5. Recognize your own boundaries—if you or someone close to you has had cancer, refer the employee to someone else for support. Know that it's okay to NOT be the one to provide primary emotional support at work unless you really feel you can.

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6. If the employee wants to work during treatment, ask:
 - How long will he/she be gone? Know that the person will have no idea how he/she will feel during treatment so build flexibility into the plan.
 - How will the team be impacted by the absence—does work need to be reassigned?
 - How will productivity expectations need to be adjusted and managed?
 - What is the culture at work regarding illness? Will morale need to be addressed?
 - Designate a point person for gathering and sharing information as appropriate.
 - Know company policy and procedures for sharing personal information with customers and outside vendors if applicable—is it ok or not?
7. Gather Information—length of treatment, physical limitations, and expected time away from work. Know that all of these elements may change.
8. Be sensitive to the person's emotional states—collaborate with the person to devise a system for when it is okay to talk about the situation, and when it is not. One simple way would be to make signs to post at the person's desk with either a smiling face or a frowning face.
9. Gather your team on a regular basis to check in and support each other.
10. Recognize the potential for an employee with cancer to be isolated at work:
 - The fear of being perceived as weak and without value can make one not share a diagnosis.
 - Choosing not to share the diagnosis with a supervisor or others can result in a lack of support and understanding at work.
 - An employee with cancer may be excluded from normal happy work events such as baby showers, weddings, happy hours, picnics, and birthday gatherings, because colleagues may worry it would be “cruel” to include him or her.

Compassion, assistance from your HR department, and following your employee's wishes can help you develop a thoughtful plan to keep him or her working. Working can offer an employee with cancer a place to be “normal” and distracted from worrisome and complicated issues the disease brings. Working is also financially important as people face mounting costs for extensive medical care. Finally, co-workers may have become a kind of family over time, and provide significant support for people whose families at home may be unable to be supportive without judgement or control.

While cancer at work can certainly be difficult, it can be managed to allow those with this diagnosis continue their jobs with dignity and a structure of support.

Remember that you're not alone in this. Your EAP is here for both you and your employee with consultation, resources, and support. Call us anytime at (800) 777-4114 for assistance.