



## WHEN A COLLEAGUE HAS CANCER

### SOME HELPFUL TIPS ON WHAT TO SAY AND DO

#### Phrases and Questions That Come Naturally May Be Hurtful, Not Helpful

When a colleague is diagnosed with cancer, most people simply don't know what to say. Speechless is the usual reaction. What will you—or should you—say? Your thoughts race as you rehearse something heartfelt. If it's the first time you've had a colleague diagnosed with cancer, it's probably more difficult. Even worse, what you may think is a natural and helpful question or comment may not be helpful at all—and may be hurtful.

#### Preparation For Deciding What To Say

First, assess how close you are to your colleague. What you would say to someone you've spent coffee breaks and lunches with for years is bound to be different from what you would say to a co-worker with whom you wait for the lift and exchange pleasantries.

Remember, too, that everyone is different—each person handles the diagnosis and treatment differently. While there are general tips about what to say and not say, it's also important to take cues from your colleague. Tune in, and focus on their reactions when you are talking. If they seem reluctant to talk, respect that desire.

#### What To Say

Whatever the strength of the bond, it's natural to feel awkward, sad, fearful, angry, and to be in disbelief. Here, suggestions on how to put your concern into words.

#### "I am sorry this is happening to you."

This is simple and heartfelt. If your colleague is a man, you might skip the word sorry, as some men associate the word with pity. Instead: "I think it's unfair this is happening to you."

#### "I don't know what to say or how to say it, but I do want you to know I am here for you."

This acknowledges your awkwardness and lets your colleague know that if they feel like talking, you're a willing audience. This may be enough of an exchange for now, especially since the diagnosis is new. Always let them guide the discussion and decide how much to talk about the cancer.

#### "Don't worry about work."

Only say this, of course, if you are willing to pitch in or if you are their boss and can assure them not to worry. In a survey of more than 600 cancer survivors, this comment was valued greatly.

#### "I am thinking of you."

Just saying that lets them know that you care.

#### "How are you feeling today?"

Asking that way—instead of "Is your chemo making your hair fall out?" allows the colleague to open up and tell you about their challenges or simply give a brief answer and move on, if they don't feel like sharing.

**EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICES AUSTRALIA PTY LTD**

[www.easa.net.au](http://www.easa.net.au) • [help@easa.net.au](mailto:help@easa.net.au) • PO Box 2077 Greenhills NSW 2323

Ph 0407 918 998 • Emergency 0407 111 003 • For life threatening emergencies call 000

### **"May I email you?"**

Often, people view emails and texts as cold, but it may offer some benefits as you continue to communicate with your colleague. That's especially true if they are off work for treatment. Email is not as intrusive as a voicemail or telephone call. It doesn't require an immediate response, as a text seems to do. It allows them to respond when their workload or mood permit. The same straightforward comments--that you are thinking about them and trying to help with the workload--should work fine.

### **"Wasn't that a productive meeting?"**

Remembering to talk about "normal" work activities is important. That way, cancer talk doesn't dominate every conversation. Your colleague will feel like they are still an important member of the team. Just as importantly, they can take a break from thinking about the cancer.

### **What Not To Say**

The list of questions and comments that many people think are helpful--but aren't--is surprising to many people. Here, what the experts suggest not saying to a colleague with cancer:

#### **"I know how you feel."**

Even if you were diagnosed with the same kind of cancer, you can't know how they feel. There are just too many variables. Your colleague may be thinking, rightfully, "How on earth can they know what I am going through?"

#### **"My brother had this kind of cancer and he was in the hospital for months."**

You may think you are showing that you relate to them. The colleague newly diagnosed, however, is likely to hear the part about being in the hospital for months--not a cheery thought! The colleague may also feel like you are more interested in talking about your brother than in focusing on them --and their cancer.

#### **"I know this will turn out OK."**

That sounds so upbeat--to you. But to the cancer sufferer, it sounds dismissive of all the things they worried about. Because of course they have thought: "What if it doesn't turn out all right?" Saying that things will turn out fine dismisses their anxiety about the outcome as trivial. Instead of the blanket reassurance, try: "Whatever happens, I am here for you"—but only if you will be.

#### **"The same thing happened to my neighbour, and it worked out fine."**

Suppose a colleague who has lost their hair after chemo is a little down about the regrowth. Often, people will refer to someone else who went through it, as in: "My neighbour lost her hair, and hated it when it first returned, but now it's very cute." Nice story, you think, but it takes the focus off your colleague's angst. What they really may want is for you to join them in that awful moment of time and just commiserate--or make suggestions about what they can do to encourage the regrowth, if you know. You need to focus on their challenge, and keep the neighbour out of it.

#### **"Did you drink?" "Do you smoke?"**

Yes, the risk of liver cancer (and other cancers) is linked with excess alcohol intake. Lung cancer is tied with smoking, although nonsmokers get it, too. Yes, it's natural to wonder. Shelve it as an unanswered question. If the person did smoke or drink, what value is there in knowing, other than satisfying your curiosity? Answering will only bring them down and in some cases make them feel guilty--not helpful to recovery.

#### **Don't let talk about the cancer dominate every conversation.**

Remember your colleague no doubt wants to give the "cancer talk" a rest, at least now and then. Be sure to focus on work topics, too. Saying something as simple as "Wasn't that a productive work meeting?" can go a long way to helping them feel like things are getting back to normal. It can also make them feel that they are still an important team member at work.

Once treatment is finished, realise that your colleague may want to talk about the experience less and less. So allow them to start any discussions about cancer. Instead, you can resume conversations that took place before the diagnosis. Many cancer survivors go back to work hoping for this kind of support and camaraderie--and a return to normal.

## What To Do and Not Do

### Preparation For Deciding What To Do

How you help a colleague, and what you offer to do for them, will depend on how close the relationship is. If you're colleagues who have worked together for years and become friends, that's a different bond, of course, than you have with someone you have only a professional relationship with.

### What To Do

- Go beyond the usual "Let me know if I can do anything." As well-meaning as that offer is, the usual response is simply "Ok" followed by no request. And even if they need something, this means they have to come up with the request and figure out if you are agreeable. It's much better to offer your plan for helping. Something like: "I can fill you in on office meetings every Friday during my lunch hour" or: "I can drop off the mail every Monday, if you wish."
- Offer to reduce the work strain--even if they are still off work for treatment. The key here is to ask--and get--permission. You might ask: "Is there a special client you are worried about? May I call him for you, to let him know he's still in good hands?" Or: "Is there something on your desk that needs attention and that I could attend to for you?" Or you could ask: "What work project is stressing you the most right now? Let's plan how I could help you reduce that stress." If the colleague will be away from work for an extended time, you might offer to forward emails, deleting the junk mail first. Once you start helping, it may become easier for them to ask for work-related help.
- Consider a care package. What goes in it, of course, depends on your relationship with your colleague. You could include something to help your colleague think about, and look forward to, returning to work. Or you could go the comfort route, including magazines, a massage voucher or a movie pass or two.
- Never underestimate the power of a simple card. In a survey of cancer survivors, women in particular said they appreciated receiving cards. A simple "We miss you" goes a long way to lifting spirits. The cards don't have to be syrupy sweet. The survivors said they loved funny cards. It makes sense: a good laugh can help lighten the moment.
- Offer to take over a routine task. This could be a weekly errand--work-related or not--that needs to be done, such as a work report, laundry or dry cleaning or other chores.
- Offer to help find resources that are helpful. If you are the office "research" maven, this could be a natural for you. Offer to help your colleague find the need of the moment--that could be a hospital bed for home, the name of a doctor for a second opinion, or contacts for a temporary babysitter.
- Offer to take a walk with them. Whether the colleague accepts or not depends, of course, on their energy level and whether they are up to physical activity. But it's helpful to offer, as the activity puts the focus back on "normal."

### What Not To Do

- Do not drop in. This applies not only to your colleague's home but to the hospital, even if you hear they are doing well. Calling or texting ahead only takes a second.
- Do not visit your colleague if you are sick--or getting sick. If you have a tickle in your throat or a sniffle, and are trying to decide whether it's allergies or a cold, stay away. While many people go to work with a cold, a cold is a big deal for some cancer patients.
- Do not deliver food without first asking--and letting them know what exactly it is. Taking a meatloaf to a household of vegetarians isn't helpful. Neither is taking a fancy nut mix to the hospital when your colleague is on a bland diet. Try this: "I'm making lasagne tonight. Would you like me to drop over some for you?"

- Do not engage in long phone calls--no matter how much you think your colleague loves to hear your reports about work. Fatigue is common among survivors even after treatment, so give them a chance to rest and heal.
- Do not be so afraid of doing the wrong thing that you do nothing--especially when you are eager to help your colleague. Diffuse your stress by admitting your awkwardness. Try saying: "I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but...." You'll soon find out.

### **Looking after yourself**

It's natural to feel a range of emotions in response to your colleague's diagnosis. However, if you feel overwhelmed, it may be beneficial to speak to someone.

Talk to HR, your manager or mentor or EAP provider about how you are feeling.

*Adapted from <http://www.cancerandcareers.org>*