

# How to Help a Co-Worker with Cancer

When a co-worker is diagnosed with cancer, it's natural to feel like you want to help – but it's also sometimes a challenge to know exactly how to provide the right support to someone going through a difficult situation. Supportive co-workers can make a positive impact on the patient's cancer journey.

## What to Expect

Cancer patients often experience emotional and physical changes – these commonly include increased anxiety, fear, depression, and fatigue. Supervisors and co-workers should expect these changes and make arrangements to support the patient and each other during the treatment process.

Remember that just as each member of your work team has unique skills and personalities, your cancer patient's colleagues will have different reactions and needs. Learn and respect your colleague's wishes related to privacy, communication, and support.

## How to Help

Providing consistent, ongoing, and practical support to co-workers can be an important source of encouragement to a colleague throughout cancer treatment. If a co-worker is open to sharing their cancer journey, following are a few practical tips to show you care:

- **Send notes.** Short, personalized cards reminding patients that they are missed and that “work isn't the same without them” can lift spirits far more than an expensive gift.
- **Send texts.** A quick text message or email letting the patient know you're thinking of them can be the extra boost they need to get through the day.
- **Prepare gift baskets.** A customized collection of work-related trinkets or comforting items will help the patient stay connected to the office.
- **Offer to be the POC (point of contact).** Sharing details over and over can get difficult for the patient, so offer to be the designated “communication person” for relaying important information to the patient's team when necessary.
- **Deliver food.** If you know the patient's favorite food, offer to bring it over during lunch or dinner at a time convenient to the patient.
- **Make time.** Brief visits (always call or text ahead of time), sharing music, or watching a favorite TV show with the patient demonstrates genuine concern.
- **Offer extra work support.** If you know the patient is having a particularly busy week juggling work responsibilities, treatment, and recovery, offer to reduce the work strain by asking how you can provide work-related help.

Returning to “normal” for your colleague with cancer likely includes resuming their pre-cancer work routine. However, finishing treatment and returning to regular work duties does not mean the patient is not still experiencing longer-term side effects, such as fatigue, neuropathy, and ‘chemo-brain.’ They may look great, but they are still going through ‘cancer rehab’ on the inside. Keep this in mind as your colleague transitions back into a work routine.

Most importantly, during treatment, adjusting work responsibilities and encouraging patients through appropriate words actions can have a positive impact on a colleague's cancer experience and recovery.



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