

Tips for Employers & Coping with Cancer

If you are an employer and have an employee who is undergoing serious illness, such as Cancer, you can inadvertently contribute to the stress of that employee without even realizing it. In addition to the ordeal of going through a serious illness, employees often undergo great stress due to their absence from work. As a result, Cancer Survivors and Caregivers have come together to offer the following tips on how an Employer can be supportive of an employee going through serious illness. You can help your employee better Cope with Cancer by following some simple suggestions.

1. Some employers just don't get it. They take an employee who has been a valued member of the team one day and then the next act as if that employee never existed. Once an employee experiences serious illness, they often find the employer and top management staff never call, visit, or even send a card. It was as if the employee was disenfranchised from the company. If an employee is valuable to you during the times they are at work you should show no less appreciation than during a time in their life when they really need it.
2. Show care and concern for the employee's situation but do not intrude unless asked. It is perfectly okay to ask if there is some way in which you can participate or help but do not arbitrarily do so on your own. Cancer often robs persons of their independence and dignity. That is why it is so important for the survivor to continue working hard at doing something productive, even if it is a little thing. By automatically taking a duty away from an employee going through serious illness without asking, you may be removing something that makes them feel they still have independence.
3. Along that same line, think before acting. You would be amazed at the number of people who act without thinking. In one case, a valued member of a team was diagnosed with a serious form of Cancer. This meant that several projects the person was working on would have to be picked up by others. The individual had every intention of returning to work after several scheduled surgeries. However, a period of time went by and she heard very little from the company and nothing from her boss. Then she heard through the grapevine that another woman had been hired in her place. What great insensitivity! The person was left to wonder if she would even have a job to return to. In the end, it was determined that the new hire was temporary in nature, but wouldn't it have been better to have let the person know it up front, rather than find out with little explanation. As an employer don't get so caught up in the work situation that you fail to remember your employee's feelings. Treat them as you would want to be treated.
4. Even with good insurance, Cancer and other serious illnesses can be crippling financially. As an employer, consider your actions in this light. A person who is off fighting serious illness may be going through a crisis financially. Any moves you make as an employer may be interpreted as taking away the employee's job and reducing benefits. It really doesn't matter what you meant that counts but how the employee will interpret it if it is not fully explained.
5. In another case, a seriously ill Cancer patient was being taken care of by her daughter who still had a full time job. The demands of both the job and her mother were taking a toll on her. She went to her boss for suggestions on what he thought she might be able to do. The woman was not highly thought of at work so the employer just told her there was little that could be done with the exception of leave. The employer told her just enough to get themselves off the hook. Unfortunately, the employee later found out that she could have used the Family Leave Act to take care of her mother and then later return to the work force. Naturally, she felt betrayed during this most critical moment in her life. Regardless of the temptation to get rid of a problem employee, an employer should resist that urge and take the high ground doing what is right rather than what is expedient.
6. As an employer maintain strict confidentiality. Nothing is more demeaning to an employee than to have told a boss something in confidence that is later repeated throughout the workplace. For example, a Cancer patient undergoes a mastectomy and returns to the workplace wearing drains under their shirt. The drains have to be emptied several times during the day and the employee asks for understanding in allowing a relaxed dress code and flexibility in taking breaks. The employer agrees, but later discusses in detail why it

was allowed in the work place. Having drains coming out of your body is sufficient to deal with let alone having your confidence betrayed.

7. Don't remove yourself or allow the employee to remove themselves from the job. If you send emails throughout the company and they do not contain information that would be confidential, copy the employee at home on their personal email account. That way they can still feel like part of the company. Invite them to company functions and consider sending them to programs, conferences, and seminars that would be appropriate and would still maintain their interest.
8. One person indicated that their company provided a laptop computer and set up secured communications at the person's home. In this manner, even though they didn't feel well, they could still communicate and work at a pace that their health allowed. When an employer shows compassion and tries to do everything possible to keep the employee connected you will have an extremely loyal employee upon their return to the workplace.
9. Employees going through serious illness may need more advanced treatments such as chemotherapy. Chemo affects different people in different ways. Try to be understanding and flexible in working out flexible schedules for the person engaged in treatment or the caregiver responsible for taking that person for treatment. For example, one survivor worked out a program with her boss to work through her lunch hour each day of the week in order to take off the last four hours of Friday so she could do her chemotherapy. This allowed her to conserve leave, allowed the employer to gain the same amount of work, and produced loyalty on the part of the employee back to the company because they were willing to work with them. Others mentioned that they had employers who worked with them in creative ways so that they did not have to use precious leave during treatments. Still, others mentioned that they had bosses who were very hard lined about things and they offered little to no flexibility. In these cases, the added stress of having an inflexible boss and trying to juggle serious health treatments just contributed to the person's inability to cope with the disease. As an employer, ask your self how you would want to be treated in these cases?
10. Cancer and other serious illness can often lead to a variety of emotions and stressors that the individual may not even be aware of. While not intruding, watch for any signs of these in your employee. It may be that rudeness to a customer is actually rooted in chemical reactions to treatments or emotional reaction to a certain diagnosis. Again without intruding, concentrate on the behavior and offer positive suggestions for how the two of you can deal with that behavior on the job. In some cases, the employee may not really be ready to come back full time in the specific capacity they operated at previously. Consider, allowing them to come back first on a part time capacity or on a full time capacity with increased responsibility as they are able to handle it.
11. Caregivers often times hold down full time jobs. In many cases they are the spouse or close friend of someone being treated for serious illness. These people are the primary source of transportation and care for someone who may not be able to care for themselves. Many times because they are not the person actually being treated, employers take a harder line approach then they would with a person who is the actual recipient of treatment. As an employer, remember that most of the things that apply to survivors in the workplace also apply to those giving care. Try to be as caring, understanding, and flexible as you can humanly do.
12. If you are a faith filled employer, don't be afraid to let your employee know you are praying for them as well as their family. Above all else, don't let the employee or caregiver withdraw from contact with the company and try to stay connected to let them know you care about their situation. If you do, you will have a very loyal employee in most cases.