Article Series Talking About Cancer

Communicating the Support You Need at Work

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All Talking About Cancer

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About half of people diagnosed with cancer are at an age where they're still working. If you're one of them, you may be wondering about how to talk to your co-workers about what you're going through.

How much information you choose to share at work is personal. You may want to keep your health private. Or you may find meaning in sharing and connecting with others. Which approach makes sense for you?

Microsteps are small, easy actions that may improve your well-being. These can help you to think about what matters to you when it comes to telling co-workers about a diagnosis of cancer. As always, consult with your care team for the management practices that are best for you.

Talking to your care team.

Before sharing news at work, think about speaking to your doctor or care team about how your diagnosis and any treatment you may receive might affect your work. Consider the kind of work you do, your typical working day, and how your treatment may affect you physically and mentally.

Setting up a conversation with your HR office.

Your employer may have benefits or policies you weren't aware of before. Consider sharing what your needs are in terms of time off and other ways your workplace can support you. You may be able to access Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). These give you access to a healthcare professional that can help with personal, relationship or work-related struggles.

Thinking ahead about questions your co-workers may ask.

Remember that different people will react to your news differently. Some may be emotional, while others may not know what to say. Making a plan of what you want to say ahead of time may be helpful. You may also wish to think about how people might react. Taking time to make a plan may help you feel more prepared going into these conversations.

Owning the conversation.

It's ok to own the kind of conversation you want to have with your co-workers. You may consider asking them not to talk about your cancer with anyone else without asking you first. And if they say something that bothers you, consider letting them know.

Asking for flexibility.

Think about sharing your treatment schedule with your manager. This can allow you to create a plan together that allows you to get your important work done, and calls in the support you need. This plan might include flexible working hours, working at home, or reducing your workload. You may also need to pause work altogether — and if you do, having a plan in place may make things easier.

Keeping records of discussions you have about your illness with your employer.

After meeting or talking with your employer about your illness, consider writing a summary of what was spoken about. This could include the date, time, and key points. Hopefully, your employer will be supportive. This may not always be the case. If you feel you’re being treated in an unfair way, make sure you keep a note of it.

Staying connected with your team.

If you need to take time off or reduce the hours you work, you may want to stay in touch and get regular updates from your employer about workplace changes and team projects can help you feel included and make you feel less alone. Staying in touch with your co-workers can also ease the transition back to full-time work when you're ready.

Understanding your rights

You may be worried about losing your job while living with cancer, particularly if you do need to adjust your work schedule or take time off. The important thing to remember is that you have rights. Check out the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which are federal laws that protect employees with illnesses and/or disabilities. Visit MyHealthcareFinances.com to learn more about Health Insurance, Medical Bills, and Employment & Disability.

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