Article Series Talking About Cancer All

Communicating what you need at work

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All Talking About Cancer

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> **"About 50% of people who are working when they are diagnosed with cancer are worried about their employment."**

If you're feeling anxious about working or returning to work while living with cancer, you're not alone. In fact, about 50% of people who are working when they are diagnosed with cancer are worried about their employment.

Fortunately, there are many resources available to help you navigate the workplace while living with cancer. Read on to learn more about how you can communicate what you need from your employer and your coworkers.

Telling your colleagues about your diagnosis

No one should pressure you into talking about your cancer at work. You may feel that it's far too personal a topic to discuss with your coworkers. However, it's also perfectly fine if you want to share what's going on with your team members.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you decide if, when and how to have these conversations:

- You can be as private—or as open—as you want.
- Consider confiding in a few of your close colleagues first. You may find they're eager to support you in whatever way they can.
- Understand that everyone will react to the news differently. Some people may be emotional, while others may be at a loss for words.
- Think ahead about some questions your colleagues may ask and how you might respond.

Owning the conversation

If and when you decide to have these discussions, remember it's okay to be assertive about what you need from your coworkers. You can ask them not to talk about your illness with anyone else unless you give them permission. And if they say something insensitive to you, let them know.

For example, how they talk about your illness can have a huge impact. Your colleagues might use words like "fight" or "battle" to describe your struggle with cancer. They may say, "You're strong. You'll beat this." Some people, like Fred, a comedian who brings a pair of boxing gloves to his doctors' appointments, may feel encouraged by this kind of language. But others may feel these words imply a certain amount of blame: If you "lose your battle" with cancer, does that mean you simply didn't fight hard enough, or weren't strong enough?

Talking about cancer isn't easy, and there's no right or wrong way to do it. What's most important is that you decide what you're comfortable with and communicate this with your coworkers. One way to set expectations is to let your colleagues know

how you are experiencing cancer and how you would prefer they talk about it.

Knowing when to return to work

While many people continue to work while living with cancer, others may find they need to develop a more flexible schedule with their employer. And some may need to take short- or long-term medical leaves during treatment and recovery.

If you've taken time off while living with cancer, you might be impatient to get back to work. Working might help you feel empowered, give you a sense of stability and structure and allow you to be part of a team that collaborates and solves problems. But it can be hard to know when—and how—you should make that transition.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when deciding if it's time to return to work:

- Do you have any long-term effects from your treatment?
- What are the physical and mental demands of your job?
- What follow-up appointments have you scheduled with your healthcare team, and will they interfere with your regular work hours?
- Do you feel well enough to go back to work?
- Do you feel your company will be flexible and will try to accommodate any changes that are needed to your work schedule as a result of treatment?

Once you've decided you're ready to go back, make a plan.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Ask your employer if it's possible for you to work from home some days, or go from full-time to part-time.
- Make sure your company can accommodate any physical needs you have.
- Try to schedule your follow-up doctors' appointments at times that won't conflict with your work commitments.

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. Visit Cancer and Careers to learn more and find resources and tips for working while living with cancer.

Speaking up for yourself

As you navigate the workplace during and after your cancer diagnosis, be sure to:

- Keep careful records of any discussions you have about your illness with your employer, including copies of job performance evaluations.
- 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.

Hopefully, your employer will be supportive. But, unfortunately, there are cases of workplace discrimination against cancer survivors. If you feel you are being treated unfairly upon returning to work, Workplace Transitions may help you better understand your rights in the workplace.

And if you're a caregiver, you might find some useful information at Help for Cancer Caregivers.

The bottom line? Know your rights, and don't be afraid to speak up about what you need.