

# A guide for employers

How to talk about cancer

**WE ARE  
MACMILLAN.  
CANCER SUPPORT**

**WORKING  
THROUGH  
CANCER**



## 2 How to talk about cancer

You may feel awkward talking about cancer. You will want to help, but it can be hard to know what to say. Try to tailor your approach to the individual.

People have different communication needs and styles. Some people naturally like to talk about their thoughts and feelings, while others are quite private. Cultural differences matter too. Some languages do not even have a word for cancer. In some communities it is taboo: something people do not think they should mention. People may be embarrassed to discuss the physical details of their cancer, especially if a person of the opposite gender is present. These differences are reflected in the way that people want to discuss how cancer is affecting them.

Communication about cancer, when handled effectively, can be very helpful to everyone concerned and there are clear strategies you can use to make these conversations easier (see page 15).

### Guidelines on sensitive communication

These are only guidelines. Communication is a very individual matter and you will need to judge the appropriate response for a given situation.

#### Try to:

- Choose a private place to talk and make sure you won't be interrupted.
- Be prepared for the meeting to overrun. Let your employee set the pace
- Show you are listening. Encourage conversation by nodding or with verbal cues like 'I see' or 'what happened next?'
- Show it's okay to be upset by remaining calm yourself, and allowing your employee time to recover if emotions spill over.
- Show empathy with phrases like, 'you sound very upset'.
- Respond to humour (but don't initiate it). If your employee tells a joke, it's a legitimate coping mechanism.
- Feel able to adjourn the meeting if your employee becomes too distressed to continue.

#### Try not to:

- Be afraid of silence. It's okay if the conversation goes quiet for a bit.
- Be too quick to offer advice – although sometimes people do not know what or how to ask.
- Use clichés like 'things could be worse' or 'things will work out'.
- Discount your employee's feelings.
- Share stories about other people you know who have cancer. This takes the focus away from your employee.

## First conversations

As soon as you become aware that an employee or their loved one has been diagnosed with cancer, encourage them to have a confidential and supportive discussion with their line manager, HR manager or occupational health manager (as appropriate within your organisation).

Some employees may prefer to look for help themselves and access existing policies without specifically revealing a cancer diagnosis, or having a meeting in the first instance. For others, an informal initial conversation may be preferable.

Your employee may wish to have a third party present at this or future meetings, such as a colleague, family member, friend, or trade union representative. This is fine, but the need to respect your employee's privacy is essential. Take notes at the meeting if your employee wishes, stressing they will not be circulated to anyone else outside the room without permission from the employee. At all times, take care to protect the confidentiality of this documentation. Communication and note-taking should be handled sensitively – this is not a grievance meeting.

If they can, let your employee take the lead by telling you what has happened. When it's time for you to move the conversation on, here are some points you could ask about:

- how they are feeling, emotionally and physically
- whether they wish colleagues to be informed and what information should be shared
- what sort of time off they might need for medical appointments and during treatment (they may not know at this point – it's often a case of seeing how things go).

You can also offer information about:

- the options for time off
- organisational policies on flexible working, work adjustment and return-to-work after sick leave
- their rights under the Equality Act 2010, which covers people with a cancer diagnosis, and other relevant laws such as carers' legislation (see page 25)
- any services your organisation offers to help them (for example, an employee assistance programme that provides counselling).

If your organisation has access to a welfare officer or occupational health expert, it could be helpful to involve them at an early stage if the employee wants their help.

Make sure you close the meeting with an assurance that your employee's work is valued and that your door is always open if they need your assistance. Agree how you will keep the lines of communication open, and set a date for the next meeting so you can keep on top of the situation.

## Telling colleagues

It is important that communication with colleagues, clients and customers is not haphazard or left to chance. Agree a communication plan with your employee early on, including what you will, and will not mention to others.

They may not wish to tell others they are affected by cancer. This must be your employee's decision. However, colleagues may be more understanding about absences, changes in work arrangements and new assignments if they know what is happening.

- If your employee agrees that others should know, ask them:
- if they want to break the news themselves
- if someone else should do it, and whether they want to be present
- how the news should be communicated, for example one-to-one, or in a meeting
- how much information should be shared and what should remain confidential.

When sharing information, concentrate on the impact your employee's illness may have on people and projects at work. Avoid personal details. Use positive language, but be honest about what to expect. Don't dramatise, and inform your team about how to best approach and talk with their colleague.

You can also invite staff to speak to you or another manager if they are having practical problems with the situation, or if they are feeling distressed. If you think it's appropriate, you can point them towards services like Macmillan, which can provide more support.

'I work in a not-for-profit organisation with employees spread around the country. Our office is a small, close group of just 15 and as soon as I got my diagnosis, I informed my boss. He was brilliant. He told me to take any time off that I needed and said, "We're here for you". He meant it. Even when the general manager visits, he makes a point of giving me five minutes to ask if there's any more support I need.'

**Dave, prostate cancer**

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on how to talk about cancer, you can order our free booklet, *Lost for words – how to talk to someone with cancer*, on [be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk) or by calling **0808 808 00 00**.