

What to Say (and Not Say) to a Co-Worker with Cancer

A cancer diagnosis can be a life-altering event for patients and their families, but it also often puts a very personal matter front and center in a professional setting – the workplace.

Cancer treatment advancements and access to high quality care in local communities means that some patients can continue to work during treatment. Others may need a modified schedule or need to take a break from work completely.

Conscientious, caring co-workers can help, but knowing what to say and do can be tricky. Effective support in the workplace can improve a patient's cancer experience and outlook.

What to Say

The following are a few things you can do to help show your co-worker that you care:

- **Be specific about how you can help.** The standard “Let me know if I can do anything” might be heartfelt, but it places the onus on the patient to follow up. Instead, it's usually more helpful to offer specific support to your colleague such as updating the co-worker on office happenings, assisting on a special work project, or taking over a routine task.
- **Keep conversation positive.** During brief conversations, focus on topics the patient enjoys discussing. Conversing about work activities or other normal issues helps ensure that cancer isn't the main topic of every discussion.
- **Listen.** Knowing that someone is willing to listen can make a big impact. If you're struggling to find the right words to say, sometimes it's best to simply show that you're willing to listen if they need someone to talk to.
- **Speak from the heart.** Sometimes a simple “I'm so sorry this is happening to you” is the perfect heartfelt thing to say in response to a new diagnosis.

What Not to Say

There are also some things co-workers should avoid telling a cancer patient:

- **Don't offer unsolicited advice.** It is best to simply respect the patient and their choices.
- **Avoid personal stories.** Don't tell the patient about other people you know who were affected by cancer, especially if the outcome was negative.
- **Never say “I know how you feel.”** Unless you specifically had the same cancer treatment, you can never truly understand that person's journey. It's better to listen to the patient.
- **Don't tell the patient to “cheer up” or to “stay positive.”** It might come across as insensitive or insulting. It could also add more pressure to an already stressed patient.
- **Don't engage in long phone calls or conversations.** Cancer patients usually need rest, but the patient might be too polite to say so.
- **Don't assume they're cancer free.** Patients who are no longer receiving treatment are still recovering – sometimes for up to a year post-treatment. Do not assume a person is “cured.” They may have only completed active treatment at this time.

In addition to saying the right thing, there are also actionable things you can do to provide support. Remember, too, that while there are general tips to help guide what you say or do, everyone is different. It's important to take cues from your colleague and respect their wishes related to privacy, communication, and support. For additional resources related to navigating cancer in the workplace, visit [TexasOncology.com](https://www.texasoncology.com).