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Touched By Cancer?

BY HELEN GALL



When a coworker is diagnosed with cancer, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. Of course we want to offer support, but sometimes it seems easier to say nothing at all out of fear it saying the wrong thing.

Don't let fear prevent you from saying or doing something. Even if imperfect, it demonstrates care and empathy. Your actions can help your coworker feel reconnected as they strive to find a sense of normalcy.

Your coworker will experience both good and bad days, both

emotionally and physically. The easy conversations that the two of you shared before their illness may feel strained now, but don't take this to mean you've said or done something wrong.

Thanks to Cisco employees who faced their own cancer battles, we've compiled helpful support strategies to use when someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer.

Here's What to Do:

- **Be honest.** Address any unease you may feel directly. "I'm not sure what to say, other than I'm sorry. I'd like you to know I'm here for you," acknowledges your discomfort but reassures your colleague that you're thinking of them.
- **Let them guide the conversation** when it comes to how much they want to share about their cancer. Some people want to be left alone; others need to be open.
- **Be specific.** Avoid the generic "Let me know if I can do anything." Offer a plan to help, such as: "I can fill you in on our Friday team meetings so that you don't have to listen to the recordings."
- **Be gently persistent.** Ask again to offer specific support if the initial response is declined. Wait a week or two. Consider making your offer through a text or an email. It allows your colleague to consider it without pressure to respond immediately.
- **Offer to reduce their workload,** especially if the coworker is taking time off for treatment. Perhaps ask: "What project is causing you the most stress right now? Let's make a plan on how I can help reduce your stress." Be sure to receive their permission to tackle their workload before you proceed.
- **Offer to take over a routine task.** You could shop for groceries, pick up their kids from school, or finish a weekly report – work-related or personal.
- **Offer written support.** The power of a personal note, card, or email goes a long way in lifting spirits. Keep things short and sincere, like, "I miss you," or, "I'm thinking of you."
- **Send a care kit,** with items that you feel are appropriate for your relationship with your colleague.

Here's What Not to Do

- **Don't just drop in.** This applies to their home and the hospital. Even if you hear that they're doing well, make sure to call or text and get permission to visit first.
- **Don't visit if you are sick.** (Enough said.)
- **Don't deliver food** without asking. Let your coworker know exactly what you intend to bring. You wouldn't want to take meatloaf to a household of vegetarians, or a fancy nut mix to the hospital when they're on a bland diet. Try this: "I'm making chili. May I bring over a pot for you?"
- **Avoid long phone calls or visits.** Fatigue is common among cancer survivors, even after treatment. Give them a chance to rest and heal – consider an email or text instead. It allows your colleague to read it at their leisure when they feel up to it.
- **Do not offer unsolicited medical advice.** It can be incredibly insensitive and only add to your colleague's stress.

What Your Cisco Coworkers Actually Say

Consider the following perspectives from some of your Cisco colleagues who have dealt with a cancer diagnosis.

"It's normal for people who have had an extended bout of illness to experience anxiety when transitioning back to "normal life." Just because the treatment has stopped, it doesn't mean that the person is not still reconciling with the emotional trauma. Survivor's guilt is one example of this," explains Danielle Sullivan, Event Content Manager, Employee Communications. "It takes years for your body and mind to recover from chemo and for your body to regain its strength. Often, it's assumed that when treatment is over, everything goes back to normal. You can't just step back into life as it was."

And Laura Farley, Legal Contracts Manager, says, "I was blown away by the support, kindness, and creativity shown by my Cisco family. I received a beautiful card from a salesperson I had only worked with once, texts from peers who were more colleagues than friends, an email from a colleague who had his kids say a nighttime prayer for me, and a feast arranged by co-workers hundreds of miles away that was delivered to my home by a local organic grocer. It can be overwhelming to wrestle with a cancer diagnosis, but all of these bits of support lifted me up and reminded me that I was connected to others and was more than my cancer diagnosis."

Forget about saying or doing the wrong thing

Open communication and a big heart can go a long way in making a positive impact on your colleague.

Are you touched by cancer? The [Cancer Support Network](#) is here to support everyone at Cisco and their families, to learn to live with cancer, thrive, and support the fight to beat this disease.

Related Links

- [Cancer Support Network](#)
- [Employee and Family Assistance Program](#)
- [Join an ERO Community](#)
- [World Cancer Day](#)
- [Support Cancer Charities on Bright Funds](#)
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