

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2016 Edition

Feature

Back to Work after Cancer: Make the Transition Easier

Make time for conversation prior to return to work



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Q We have employees coming back to work after completing their treatment for cancer. What should we be thinking about to help their return be smooth and satisfying?

A It speaks volumes that as an employer, you are already seeing that there may be a lot to consider.

Re-entering a work environment after time off is one thing, but coming back to work after cancer treatment is something else again. Cancer treatment is time consuming at the least, and at it's worst, exhausting and possibly traumatic, depending on the severity and type of cancer. What can an employer expect? And what might they do to make the transition easier for all?

First understand or try to understand. You might not have had cancer yourself, but because cancer is so prevalent, you may know others who have wrestled with the disease. Even so, know that your employee will have their own beliefs and personal experiences with their cancer. Consider having a good conversation with your employee (if they are willing) before they return to work to ensure that you fully understand their physical, mental and emotional state and needs. They may not want to disclose all information, but if your relationship has been good in the past, they may be happy that you are concerned and wanting them to feel welcomed and settled. Some people appreciate special considerations and others may be afraid they will be seen as weak or still sick.

Consider the following:

- **Ask if you can know more about their condition.** Although many kinds of cancer treatment can leave someone quite tired and ill-feeling, it isn't always true, especially if they have also been able to do supportive integrative treatments (such acupuncture or naturopathic medicine). Find out if they have any special needs with regard to the kind of work they are expected to do, especially if they have been physically changed by the kind of cancer they had (for example, throat/mouth cancer that doesn't allow them to speak in the same way). Mentally, some people feel as though they are in a mental fog (sometimes referred to as chemo brain) for a long period of time, making it harder to concentrate. What accommodations are you prepared to make with regard for their current physical and mental condition?
- **It may be helpful to know if they are coming back to work because they feel ready or because they are financially strapped and feel they have to.** This may affect how much energy they truly have and how much work they can be expected to do. Often people overestimate their energy or have forgotten how much energy it takes to be working full-time. Also, there may be continuing medical and supportive appointments needed. Is a slower return or part-time return possible?
- **Even if they are in remission and look well, they may still be feeling the effects of the treatment.** These may be physical, but more and more we are realizing that for some people, a cancer diagnosis and the treatment itself can be traumatic. If they haven't had much emotional support throughout (like counseling or yoga therapy), they may be more in need of support now. Can your HR department be of help or might there be funds for employees with regard to supportive mind/body therapies?

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Feature continued

- **While many people are relieved to be finished their treatment, for some, the end of treatment can actually be quite scary.** They have been followed by their health care team for months and have now been given the green light to “go back to their normal life”. The absence of support (and close bonds with others with cancer or their health care team) can feel like abandonment. In addition, for some kinds of cancer, there is a significant threat of recurrence, the thought of which can be challenging to live with. Some people experience more anxiety at the end of their treatment than they did at their original diagnosis. There are many cancer societies and clinics that provide ongoing help for those who have faced cancer. What support does your employee have in place and what do they need?
- **Recognize that this employee has not been “off” work; cancer is no vacation.** It is chock full of appointments, decisions and sometimes difficult treatments. They may actually be in need of some off time off before they return, whether they realize it or not. You might want to discuss the possibility of a vacation before their return.
- **Your employee may or may not want other employees to know about their cancer.** Even if they were more public before leaving, things could have changed. What would they like you to be telling any other colleagues about their return? Also, what changes have occurred since they left? What do they need to know about the current work situation?
- **Consider the possibility that your employee may have been changed by the experience of cancer.** For some, it is a brush with a life threatening disease and depending on the individual, it can be life changing, sometimes in very positive ways. They may have different priorities. Perhaps a discussion with regard to expectations (yours and theirs) would be appropriate.

Having a person return to work after a cancer experience can be the start of a new chapter of working life. It is however complex, as complex as the individuals themselves. This may require more than one conversation and time to reconsider and refine. Returning can be made easier by an open, curious and compassionate employer — you can help by being that person!

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