

Supporting a colleague with breast cancer



Breast cancer affects many New Zealanders. Ten women every day are diagnosed, so it's likely that someone in your workplace will be diagnosed with breast cancer, has had breast cancer in the past or is supporting someone with breast cancer.

The right support can make a difference and there are a number of ways you can help. We know that many people with breast cancer may want to continue working during treatment and remain connected with their workplace and their colleagues. It's important to know that breast cancer treatment can be complex, affecting people in different ways, sometimes over a long period of time. Being a supportive colleague can help reduce your co-worker's anxiety and give them the confidence to cope with breast cancer at work. In this factsheet you will find guidance on how to support them.

Finding the right words

It is often hard to find the right words when someone tells you about their breast cancer diagnosis. Just listening and encouraging the person to speak is a good way to start.

To help, here are some examples of supportive statements:

- "I don't know exactly what to say, but I hope you know I am here for you."
- "I'm sorry you are going through this."
- "If you want to talk about it, I'm here."
- "How can I help?"

Some conversations can be unhelpful. It is important not to offer your views on the cause of a person's cancer or lifestyle choices like smoking or diet. Steer clear of offering reassurances that they will be fine if you don't know this is true. You should also avoid saying that you know how your workmate is feeling or talking about your own or other people's experience of cancer, as every one's experience is different.

Here are some ways to support your colleague at work:

Show empathy

Let your colleague know that you're thinking of them and that you understand they may want support. It's natural to worry about saying the wrong thing, but saying nothing can make your colleague feel isolated. Kindness and putting yourself in the other person's shoes works well.

Let them guide you

Your colleague knows best what support they need, so it's okay to be guided by them. You may want to ask if they want to talk about their cancer or do they want privacy? Do they prefer a regular check-in about how they're doing or do they prefer to bring it up in conversation themselves?

Respect their privacy

Your co-worker may have told you about their condition, but it doesn't mean they want others to know, too. It's important that you assume that you're the only person they are telling, unless they let you know otherwise.

Offer help

There are a number of ways you can help. Small gestures of support are important like sending a card or flowers. Sometimes it's useful for someone in the office to be the main point of contact for communication, to provide updates on how they're doing and to co-ordinate offers of support. If your colleague is working through treatment, you could offer to help with work tasks or projects. Consider involving others and put together a roster. Some ways you and your colleagues can help include:

- Transport to treatment
- Dropping off meals
- Providing childcare
- Help around the home
- Financial assistance.

It's important to be realistic about the help you can offer as once committed your offer of support is important and will be counted on.

Ongoing support in the workplace

A diagnosis of breast cancer can have long-term effects for some people. It can take many months to recover following treatment for breast cancer and for some women treatment may be ongoing, with regular hospital follow-up. Continue to check in with your colleague to see how they are doing and if they need support long-term. Many others will thrive following a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, so take your cue from your colleague.

Maintain good, healthy workplace practices

Your colleague may be worried about getting sick in the office. If you are feeling sick, it's important not to spread infection so talk to your manager about working from home.

Looking after yourself

It is normal to feel a range of emotions when a colleague shares their breast cancer diagnosis, such as shock, fear or sadness. If you are feeling worried or overwhelmed, you can find support by:

- Checking in with your manager and/or co-workers at regular intervals
- Accessing the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- Talking to your GP about needing help.

Breast Cancer Foundation NZ is also a good source of information and support around breast cancer in the workplace. **You can visit our website breastcancerfoundation.org.nz or contact our specialist breast nurses on 0800 226 8773 or at breastnurse@bcf.org.nz.**