

## Cancer

If you have a company handbook that has rules and procedures for handling sickness absence, please start by explaining to the line manager that it is utterly irrelevant when someone tells you they need to be treated for cancer. The same applies to a parent of a child, or the partner of a team member and your absence policy: it is irrelevant. Whilst it is increasingly the case that cancer can be treated and kept at bay, often for the rest of someone's working life, being told that you or a close member of the family has cancer creates all sorts of anxiety, stress, lost sleep and often mental ill health. Everyone has their own way of coping, and they need appropriate support and space, not a rule book that states how many days they can take off before their pay is stopped, or disciplinary action commences.

You would think that a person who has been told they have cancer and needs a lengthy course of treatment would be the most impacted, but I have often found it is the employees who are parents and partners who struggle the most, especially in the early days. The worst period is right at the beginning, awaiting results. They are distracted and unable to concentrate, often not wanting to talk about it on the off-chance that the news from the biopsy/scan/blood test is not good. They are hurting, worrying, sometimes overthinking what will happen. Were they responsible, what more can they do, what happens if...

I have witnessed a range of reactions once the news is given. The most common is a stoic response, along the lines of 'This won't beat me. I'm going to carry on as normal.' This is either accompanied by a request that no one in the work environment be told, or the exact opposite, that everyone is told and regularly updated. The former can be quite tricky. At some point people in the team become curious about the amount of time off work the person is taking, why they 'aren't their normal selves', or similar questions that arise. You need an agreed plan to deal with this, and you will *always* need the line manager to be involved.

Although common, not everyone presents with the British stiff upper lip. There will be a small number who are derailed by the news and need extra support and help right from the beginning. There is no defined way to help in such circumstances, but the best is usually to ask good friends to provide help until family members can free-up time. This is where I have found Macmillan Cancer Support to be invaluable. They run a 24/7 phone helpline in the UK, staffed by specialist nurses and counsellors with experience of every type of issue that you will face, and they give tremendously practical and helpful advice.

The reality of the impact that a course of chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy has on an individual often only hits home a month or so in. Different cancers have different regimes, and different consultants have different preferred courses of treatment, but whilst many find that the first trips for treatment aren't as bad as they expected, the treatment regime eventually wears them down. The body starts to react to the treatment, and side effects such as nausea, bloating and hair loss lead to physical and mental fatigue. This is where the rule book has to be disregarded. A parent will need to accompany their child to the hospital and be with them whilst they recover; a stoic patient who is proud of taking a day for treatment and then returning to work may realise that they need a few extra days, or longer, before they can get back into work. And if you start telling them they only have a few days of parental leave left, or their sick pay is about to expire, then you are piling further stress and concern on top of a person already at the end of their tether, so just don't!

Look after someone when they have to deal with an issue like this, and they will repay you with their loyalty for years to come afterwards, and their work colleagues will do the same.

A well-meaning mistake made by some line managers is to tell someone they can have as much time off as they want, and then find a replacement for them. This might well be what is needed in some cases, but it requires careful discussion and reassurance. The last thing you want to do is to add to their pressure by putting a doubt in their mind about whether or not they will have a job to return to. If you do have to take this path, ensure that all the announcements make it clear this is an interim arrangement.

Some people have a treatment regime that impacts their immune system in such a way that, although they want to come back into the workplace, their consultant will be advising them against it, for fear they will catch an illness on the way into, or at, work. At this point the required absence can be for three or four months or more, and yet the person may want to keep busy and in touch. Being flexible and working with their wishes is key. In some cases, providing a laptop and keeping email and video-conference systems open is appropriate, offering the person a welcome distraction; in other cases agreeing an out-of-office message and setting that on the email system for the period can be the better solution.

Keeping in touch is critical. A text message or phone call, a letter with the latest news from work, an invitation for a Zoom or Skype, or to come in, or to meet at (or near) their home, should be made by whoever has taken the link role (often the line manager, sometimes the HR person, other times a close work colleague).

Once the treatment is concluded and the consultant or GP has given approval for a return to work, you need to think through the best approach with their line manager. Consider: the first day, meeting them outside the workplace and walking in with them; briefing them on changes in the workplace and agreeing appropriate flexible workload; a phased return, part-time building up to full-time; avoiding rush-hour travel; how to handle a full mail inbox; what to say to colleagues and clients on return; any special dietary or health needs; and sorting out a pay rise if they have missed a pay review.

A good friend who has just completed a course of chemo, and has recently returned to work has these additional suggestions, in her own words:

- Clear lines of communication must be kept open between the HRBP and the person at all times. If you are going to be away, let them know who is providing cover. People being treated for cancer will have good days and bad days, so, if they contact you with a query, be aware that it will probably be on a good day and they may not be able to contact you on another day, if treatment is difficult for them. Be patient with them and give them plenty of time to respond.
- If you need to send any important information to the employee, for example, regarding changes to salary, do not do this just as you are leaving the office on a Thursday evening for a long weekend! The person may want clarification and someone to discuss it with. If you are not there to talk to, this will provide added stress.
- If someone gives you an estimate of when you can expect them back at work, an estimate is all it is. Contact them a week before they are due to return and check in with them, extending sick pay arrangements as needed.

- Transitioning back to full-time employment after a long time away is difficult. It's actually much more difficult than leaving to go off sick. If your employee has had cancer, this might be the most traumatic thing they have ever dealt with in their lives.
- Cancer changes you on every conceivable level and the treatment dulls you down and can often cause chemo-brain. Be flexible with the amount of time they need on a phased return. Confidence will be low, and they may even be terrified that they can't come back and work at 100% capacity. Chemo-brain can last for up to two years, causing forgetfulness, confusion and anxiety in the workplace. Be flexible and let them know they are still supported when they return to work.
- As an HRBP, stay in touch with the person's line manager after they return to work. There are no hard and fast rules for best practice when it comes to cancer. Everyone is different, but it would be useful for managers to have flexible guidelines to work with alongside their common sense and compassion. Ensure the manager is aware that the employee may not be at 100% with their working capacity, so that they can quietly inform others not to come to your desk to demand you do some work for them in your first hour back in the office!