

# The Dos and Don'ts of Supporting a Coworker with Cancer

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Despite medical advances, cancer remains a major health concern for all of us. According to the [National Cancer Institute](#), 39.6% of men and women will be diagnosed with cancer at some point during their lifetimes.

## Wanting to Help Is Natural; Knowing How Is Difficult

It's not unusual when you learn that a coworker has been diagnosed with cancer to immediately want to help and simultaneously feel helplessness asking, "What can I do to help?"

The relationship you have with a coworker will help determine what you offer to do for that individual. Although you may feel compassion and concern for anyone ill, you don't need to step up in every situation. In fact, it can feel disingenuous if you're not especially friendly with someone who becomes ill and suddenly offer assistance with everything.

This isn't to say you shouldn't offer assistance, if it's sincere. Remember, the goal is to provide support but to do so in a way that feels right for your coworker who has cancer — and in a way that feels right for you.

## What You Can Do

- Treat them as you've always treated them. They haven't changed as a person.
- It's appropriate to express sadness or concern and to even mention, "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I'm thinking about you." A simple "I'm thinking of you" frequently is most meaningful.
- Many people undergoing cancer treatment may need some adjustments in schedules. If you have the ability to do so, explore work options such as telecommuting. Workplace flexibility and support are compassionate gifts that significantly decrease stress.

If the person isn't a close friend, you may want to reach out in the context of work, particularly if you see your coworker struggling to keep up because of missed days or lack of energy.

In extending an offer of help, try to be specific. This will tell your coworker what you can do. Or offer to perform a routine task such as a weekly report. If the colleague will be out of work for an extended time, you might offer to forward emails. Once you start helping, it may become easier for the person to ask for work-related help.

What happens if making a direct offer doesn't feel right and you still want to do something? If you share the same boss, you can have a conversation with them, "I know Bill has a lot on his plate right now, and if there's anything I can do to lighten his load, please let me know."

Here are some other options to consider:

- Make a gift basket. This can be a great group activity where everyone can contribute.
- When visiting or talking with your coworker, focus on aspects of everyday life like news from the workplace or shared experiences. You provide a distraction from the illness by not making the diagnosis the only topic of conversation.
- Send a simple greeting card. Talking on the phone can zap energy. Your colleague can read the cards when it's convenient and comfortable for them.
- Make a date. If the person feels well enough to get out of the house, ask if they'd like to go for a walk or join you and some other friends from work for lunch. Even without much of an appetite, enjoying the company of others while talking and laughing creates a more normal environment and can be therapeutic.



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- National Cancer Institute



### What Not to Do

- Remember that expressions of extreme concern aren't necessarily helpful. Often, people with cancer end up having to comfort and reassure everyone else and don't get the support they need.
- Avoid discussing about a friend or relative who passed away, or had a horrible cancer treatment experience. Likewise, avoid saying that it'll be OK if they just stay positive. It's not necessarily true, and it may add pressure rather than reassurance.
- Don't just drop in at either the hospital or your coworker's home. Call or text ahead of time — it only takes a second to do so.
- Don't visit your coworker if you're sick — or getting sick.
- Don't deliver food without first asking about likes, dislikes, or food allergies.
- Don't engage in long phone calls. Fatigue is common among cancer patients. Your coworker needs a chance to rest and heal.
- Don't let fear stop you from offering support. It's OK to admit your awkwardness. Simply start with, "I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but..." Your coworker will appreciate the sentiment and will help guide your offers.