

Create a safe space for employees with breast cancer

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Two years ago, Melody Sutton attended a staff meeting, and it saved her life.

"It's true," says Sutton. "At that meeting, a leader in my department shared a story about her personal battle with breast cancer. It was so impactful. I remember thinking, 'I am turning 40, it's time for a mammogram.'"

Sutton scheduled a routine exam with her physician, and soon after, had her first mammogram. There was no reason for concern, as she had no family history of breast cancer and no signs or symptoms of the disease. However, the results were not what she expected.

"Right away, they found a tumor," says Sutton. "I was shocked, of course. From that moment on, it was full speed ahead."

After surgery to remove the tumor, Sutton learned the devastating news that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. In the months that followed, she endured several rounds of intense chemotherapy and radiation, along with side effects like fatigue, hair loss and nausea. Sutton, the mother of 12-year-old twins, continued to work throughout, with the support of her family, friends, and her employer, Wellmark.

"There is no doubt about it. A cancer diagnosis is a major setback," says Sutton. "But my employer, my coworkers and leaders made the journey so much more doable. They allowed me to continue to stay engaged with my work while taking care of myself."

With cancer impacting one in two men, and one in three women, it's possible that one of your employees may receive a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime. Read our [employer's guide](#) to how to make a difficult journey more manageable for an employee with a cancer diagnosis.

Two years later, Sutton is technically cancer free. She does face ten years of monthly injections and daily medications to deal with the after effects of her cancer treatment, and she continues to meet with her oncologist every three months.

Breakthrough moments



According to her coworkers, Sutton wore her cancer treatment bravely, head held high.

One co-worker, Christopher White, remarks that he was inspired by Sutton's approach to her diagnosis. "When Melody enters a room, the energy intensifies. She has a way of motivating people, just by being herself. Cancer made this even more apparent."

He adds, "She takes great pride in guiding people to 'breakthrough moments' in their development. Cancer didn't change this. She was positive, fearless and determined. It was inspiring."

Encourage preventive care year-round

Sutton credits her employer with encouraging the type of preventive care that catches disease early, before they become more serious and difficult to treat. Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield had recently switched from using on-site biometric screenings to having employees schedule preventive exams outside the office with a trusted, personal physician.

While it's great to focus on breast cancer in October, it's better to encourage the dialogue about preventive care year round. According to Sutton, "Had my leader not shared her journey that day, I wouldn't have thought about getting a mammogram. I would have put it off, maybe a few months, maybe a year. Hearing my leader's story, it was personal. I felt a sense of urgency."

"If I had not scheduled that appointment, my cancer would not have been diagnosed as early as it was," adds Sutton.

Here are five ways you can empower your employees during an illness:

Consider powerhouse benefits to help employees feel empowered and productive in their day-to-day routines. This includes providing integrated medical and pharmacy benefits, an employee assistance program [External Site](#) to help employees address issues that affect them at work or home, and an Advanced Care Nurse program to assist your employees' unique health needs.

Shift schedules. Provide flexible schedules for employees who are ill by allowing them to work remotely and organizing around treatment plans. "My job is difficult to do remotely," says Sutton, whose primary job is to provide training for company leaders. "My leaders arranged my schedule so that I never had to facilitate a meeting during a week I had chemotherapy. All my training could be done on the days where I felt more up to it. Also, I could work from home the day after chemotherapy, which was a huge plus."

Be a personal resource. You can create a safe space for your employees to understand how to use their benefits most effectively, including disability benefits, time off, health insurance and more. "Right away, my leaders contacted human resources, and got them involved in a dialogue about short-term disability. I always knew I had options as my illness progressed. It was reassuring and helped me focus on recovery, instead of worrying about all the 'what-ifs.'"

Designate a room for wellness purposes. If you are able to do so, have a comfortable, private room for ill employees to take a periodic break. "At Wellmark, we have wellness rooms on every floor. Throughout the day, if I needed to rest or was not feeling well, I could use that room to rest and recuperate," recalls Sutton. "There were days my coworkers would say 'You're looking tired, why don't you take a break.' I never felt ashamed or like I was slacking off when I used the wellness room."

Provide encouragement while respecting privacy. Receiving a breast cancer diagnosis is scary, and employees in this position may feel vulnerable. Take time to listen to concerns. Encourage employees while giving them space. Do not share any information about the diagnosis and treatment unless the employee has given permission to do so.

For Sutton, the fact that the people she worked with were open and willing to talk about her cancer journey was a huge boost. Of course, it helped that her supervisor and her leader had been on their own personal journeys with breast cancer.



“They knew how to be supportive,” says Sutton. “I learned it was okay to talk about it, to be vulnerable and to have an honest conversation about what I was going through. It made a huge difference.”

Questions? No one should fight breast cancer alone. A network of support is vital to treatment and recovery. The American Cancer Society has free support programs available [External Site](#), including a program that matches newly-diagnosed breast cancer patients with a trained volunteer who has also gone through a similar diagnosis.