



Helpful Hints for Caregiving in the Workplace

Here are some helpful tips when a colleague is living with an illness or caring for a loved one who is ill.

Recognize that work relationships are often professional and social. When a colleague is living with an illness or is caring for a loved one who is ill, you may notice that there is an effect on work as well as a personal and social impact. Your level of comfort may shift depending on the nature of the interaction and whether the discussion is work-based or social.

Follow your colleague's lead. People often set the tone for how they want to be treated. Let your colleague share information as she chooses in the way that is most comfortable for her. It is not necessary to ask her a lot of medical questions. What *is* important is being a good listener. Listening is a caring gesture that shows you support her.

Those touched by illness often seek distraction and routine. When your colleague comes to the office, she is making a statement that she needs to work because she has financial concerns, or wants to work, whether it is because she welcomes the distraction, or simply wants routine or normalcy in her life, a place that is an illness-free zone. It's important to respect this much needed break.

Acknowledge the elephant in the room. While it is important to respect your colleague's need for the workplace to be an illness-free zone, if you do notice changes, such as in her appearance or energy level, it is okay to acknowledge these changes in a brief supportive remark. This can often minimize discomfort.

Understand that looks can be deceiving. Your colleague may look and seem fine. However, it is possible that she is currently experiencing side effects from treatment, or perhaps your colleague was up all night caring for her family member who is undergoing treatment. You may notice changes in your interaction that may indicate that things don't always seem as they look. Remember that the impact of illness is present, even on seemingly "good" days.

Know that the impact of treatment varies greatly. There are days when your colleague will have more energy and other days when she is overcome by fatigue and discomfort. You may see a shift in mood and patience. Be flexible and understanding, and most importantly, try not to personalize the interaction.

Respect your colleague's to-do list. Most women undergoing treatment or caring for a loved one have a list of priorities that include caring for herself, her family, and her work. She is balancing and shifting priorities constantly, depending on her needs and how she is feeling. She may miss days of work to care for herself or her family. In this light, try to give your colleague as much lead time when asking her to review or complete an assignment. This gives her more control over her timing when facing a deadline and can reduce unnecessary stress.

Remember that you are an important part of her well-being. Creating a comforting and comfortable work environment for your colleague plays an important role in her emotional well-being. Your compassion, respect, and understanding is appreciated and goes a long way.