

When Someone *in the Workplace* Is Ill

We spend a good part of our lives at work. As a result, we often form strong bonds with others. So when a close co-worker is very ill, it's normal to feel worried and upset. You may also find it harder to focus on work.

Dealing with illness can be hard. Learning of someone's illness can make us feel sad. It can also trigger our own fears of illness and death, or bring up feelings from a past loss. Remember, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to support you, day or night. By taking care of your own emotional needs, you will be in a much better place to support your co-worker.

Here are some other helpful tips to keep in mind:

- **Respect your co-worker's privacy.** Don't press for details about your co-worker's health. He or she may not want to share details of his or her health for a range of reasons. If your co-worker has shared these details with you, do not share them with others unless your co-worker says it's okay to do so.
- **Don't make assumptions about your co-worker.** If your co-worker remains in the workplace, keep including him or her in work activities. Don't assume that your co-worker will be unable to join in. Let him or her decide.

- **Stay in touch.** If your co-worker has to take time off from work, try to stay in touch. Check in to see how your co-worker is doing and keep him or her up to date on the office news. This can make your co-worker feel like he or she is still part of the team. It also shows that you care. It is easier if there is one person who takes the lead in sharing company news with your co-worker.
- **Be supportive.** Send cards or food packages to your co-worker. A warm note from management can also go a long way. When your co-worker returns to work, welcome him or her back with a card or other thoughtful token.
- **Offer help.** If you feel comfortable, ask if your co-worker would like any help from you. Sometimes, it's more helpful to offer to take on a specific task, such as providing a meal. With your manager's agreement, you may also be able to pitch in with your co-worker's work projects. Be careful to only take on as much as you can handle.

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- **Reach out.** In tough situations, we may think it's better to say nothing rather than saying the wrong thing. Chances are, however, that your co-worker will appreciate knowing that you are thinking of him or her. A simple, "I heard about your illness. I'm sorry that you aren't feeling well," is a good start.
- **Be a good listener.** Sometimes, the best gift that we can give someone who is going through a hard time is simply to listen. Follow your co-worker's lead in talking about his or her illness and try not to judge.
- **Be sensitive.** Be cautious (especially if you are the manager) when asking an employee when he or she plans to come back to work. The employee may feel pressured to come back before he or she is ready.

Facing a serious illness isn't easy. If you follow the tips above, your co-worker will appreciate and remember your kindness for many years to come.

Need help?

Call toll-free, 24 hours a day,
seven days a week:

1-800-242-6220

TTY users call 711.

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