

How to support a colleague dealing with an illness

By Angela Bergen, PhD, Age at Home



Angela Bergen

Amid a global pandemic, the topic of illness is ever present and has impacted all of us one way or another. We all know how challenging it is to be faced with an illness of any kind. Since many people spend the majority of their week at their workplace, relationships with colleagues naturally have depth to them. When a close colleague is suffering in some way, it can be difficult to know what to say and how to help. Whether it's a chronic disease, an acute illness or infection/virus, or a mental health challenge, here are some ways you can support a colleague dealing with an illness either remotely or in the office.

Offer emotional support

Whether acute or chronic, the diagnosis of an illness can stir-up difficult emotions. Feelings such as stress, fear and anger are okay and normal, but can also weigh a person down. Being available to lend a supportive ear and let them guide the conversation can go a long way. Even if you don't know quite what to say, you can soften your facial expressions and tone of voice to reflect that you care. Illness may be a difficult topic for your colleague to talk about; give them your full attention and take the time to supportively listen without trying to 'fix' anything. Validating their challenges, respecting their privacy, learning more by asking questions and letting them know you are there for them are compassionate responses. In doing so, be sure not to take on their challenges as your own; it can be a delicate balance.

Stay connected

Isolation is often a consequence of illness and staying connected is important. With safe in-person practices or by using emails or video conferencing, be inclusive with both work-related and non-work-related conversations. You can keep communication flowing via texts, phone calls, or emails to check on them and let them know you're thinking of them. You could send along a funny joke, story or meme (at an appropriate moment) as laughter can help keep their spirits up. Scheduling a coffee or lunch break video meeting is a great way to stay caught up with each other. How about

sending a gift card or themed gift basket? Even simply telling your colleague that they are valued and appreciated can help buffer some of the negativity associated with the illness they are facing.

Offer specific help

Although we mean well when we say, "let me know if I can help with anything," most people don't take us up on this non-specific offer. This puts the responsibility on them to reach out and ask for something, which is hard for many people to do. Instead, consider offering specific help. Are there ways you can help them with, or temporarily take over, small work tasks while still staying within your role and not overburdening yourself? You can loop in other coworkers to create a volunteer squad to help out as needed. You could also make sure your colleague is aware of the many grocery/meal/medication delivery programs available to help make life easier.

Stay hopeful

With all of the uncertainty, fear, and overwhelm associated with any acute or chronic illness, or mental health challenge, it is important to remain hopeful for your fellow colleague. Let them know that you believe in them and that you care. Your encouragement can provide them with additional courage and perseverance. Be there physically or remotely to celebrate their successes and empathize with any setbacks. We are not designed to face illness alone.

Recommend resources

Your colleague's illness may affect their ability to carry out their normal workload. You can encourage them to speak up to a supervisor or Human Resources team to request workload modifications or alternate tasks/schedules that are more manageable. Perhaps the work environment or culture can be adjusted to be more adaptive and supportive. You can offer to search online for specific local community resources your colleague may benefit from. If applicable, you can also encourage them to outreach your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which is a team of professionals who

provide confidential support for health and wellness, stress, depression/anxiety, substance abuse, relationship/family and career problems, and financial and legal concerns. For more serious mental health concerns, you can provide them with the Concord-area 24/7 crisis hotline, 1-844-743-5748.

Pause for a moment to take a mental inventory of your colleagues. Could any of them use a check-in call or an encouraging email today?

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