

The FIT/UCE Employee Assistance Program

Tips For Helping A Co-Worker With an Illness

DO'S

- 1) Take your “cues” from the co-worker and be respectful of their wishes. If they seem to not want to talk about it, don't talk about it.
- 2) If you are not sure what they want, ask them. If they haven't told you directly that something is wrong, but you have either heard rumors, or they have been out of work for awhile, you might say something like, “I'm not sure if anything is wrong, and don't even know if you want to talk about it, but I wanted to let you know that I care about you, and am sorry if you are going through a tough time right now.”
- 3) Don't say things you don't mean. But if you feel so inclined, you might add something like, “Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help, or if you want to talk about it.”
- 4) Depending upon your relationship, it is sometimes better to offer specific types of help that you feel comfortable offering – e.g. if they are more tired from chemotherapy or recovering from surgery, you might ask them if you could bring them lunch or coffee. If you see them outside of the office, you might ask them if they need help with shopping, babysitting, etc.
- 5) Tell them you will respect their wishes. Ask them questions like:
 - a. How can I be helpful?
 - b. Would they like you to ask them how they are feeling or would that feel uncomfortable to them?
 - c. If you see an article or hear something about what they may be experiencing, should you tell them, send it to them, or ask them before doing anything?

Remember that a person with an illness usually had no choice about getting sick and often may feel helpless, angry, or a lack of control. Let them feel that they have some control over this situation.

DON'TS

- 1) Don't assume you know what someone is feeling, or that you know what they may want or need.
- 2) Don't offer suggestions, opinions or stories about "someone you know who had the same situation." Ask them if this would be helpful to them before offering this type of information.
- 3) Don't tell anybody else what you know or suspect. Protect individual privacy and confidences. You can ask your co-worker what specifics might be shared and who they would feel comfortable knowing this information.
- 4) Don't offer false reassurances, like, "You'll be fine. I know you'll beat this thing." A person never knows, and could feel worse if they get sicker, like they didn't "try" hard enough. A person facing an illness is dealing with much uncertainty and may feel misunderstood or annoyed. It might be better to say something like, "I can't know what this time must be like for you, but I imagine it must be tough."
- 5) Don't tell people they shouldn't be depressed or that stress will make the situation worse. Although people are often trying to give the person hope and may genuinely believe that depression or stress will aggravate the condition, it is normal to be stressed and anxious when dealing with illness. The person needs a chance to process and grieve what has occurred. If you notice that these feelings seem to persist for a while and seem to be interfering with their functioning, you might gently suggest they contact a professional, e.g., the EAP, or a therapist to discuss their concerns. Always preface this comment with a supportive statement such as, "I can see what a tough time this is for you, as it would be for most people in your circumstance. I wonder if it might be helpful to discuss it with someone where it would be confidential, and safe to express what you may be experiencing at this difficult time. I'm just really concerned about you."

Remember good co-workers and colleagues can be a life line in times of trouble!