

Cancer at the desk next to you

What to do when someone at work is ill?

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At least once a month, I conduct preventive training in some company. Cancer affects everyone, so both large international corporations and small family businesses invite me. Some represent the economic or energy sectors, while others produce specialized construction or automotive accessories. Sometimes the training takes place in a modern multimedia conference room, and other times in a canteen smelling of Breton-style beans, right next to the production hall. Sometimes, I'm speaking to employees in a company near Gliwice, sometimes in the heart of Warsaw, and other times simultaneously to people in Poland, Spain, and India.

No matter the conditions, I always observe the same emotional transformation. At first, everyone in elegant blouses and subtle shirts looks at me suspiciously, glancing up from a phone displaying emails far more important than whatever I'm about to disrupt their work with. At this stage, I'm just another Friday talk—another invention from some department that some people find hard to take seriously. But once I introduce myself, start talking, and show slide after slide, phones disappear into pockets and bags, and I begin to see eyes—wider, blinking less, and sometimes even wet with tears.

After the session, we enter a kind of vacuum—sometimes just for a few minutes, sometimes for half an hour. In that space, there are no emails waiting to be answered, no blouses or shirts, no masks, roles, or business cards. There is only us—our loved ones, concerns, curiosity, and sincerity. These moments are filled with stories and questions that I don't hear anywhere else.

About Karolina from the marketing department: We noticed she was wearing a wig, but no one knew how to start a conversation with her... About Zbyszek, who died of brain cancer: He worked with us for twenty years—such a kind soul. About Julia, the secretary: She had cervical cancer, so young...

About how the team pooled money for a gift for Małgosia, who could no longer work, but no one knew what to buy—everything seemed either inappropriate or childish. Or how the president's wife was sick, and everyone kept their distance, unsure how to behave.

This text is born out of dozens of needs, questions, and stories. The following points serve as a guide, similar to the training I conduct in companies: on one hand, serious and professional, with concrete advice ready to be printed and distributed during a meeting; on the other hand, sensitive, full of care and authenticity.

How to react to news about cancer?

When someone from your workplace receives a cancer diagnosis, you might find out in three ways, each requiring a different approach.

If the person themselves informs you about the diagnosis, it will undoubtedly be a difficult and awkward moment for both of you. In an ideal world, you'd respond with a perfect combination of knowledge, empathy, and what's good in your relationship. For example:

"I understand. I'm very sorry that you're going through this. I hope you recover soon."

"That's difficult news. I believe the treatment will work. You have my support."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Stay strong."

Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world, and such news can leave you speechless or overwhelmed. If your initial reaction is inappropriate, don't beat yourself up about it. Instead, when you feel ready, return to the conversation in a safe space and say:

"The news about your illness took me by surprise and really upset me. I'm sorry for my reaction."

Then, try again using one of the above responses. If you feel too nervous, practice saying these difficult words in front of a mirror. While the suggested phrases can help, what matters most is authenticity and empathy. It's okay not to know what to say—saying "I don't know what to say" is also perfectly valid. It's okay if your response is unique to your relationship. It's okay if you sigh or get teary-eyed before you can speak. This situation is truly difficult for both of you.

In many cases, you'll hear the news through the grapevine—perhaps the person informed their supervisor and team, but the news reached you indirectly. If that happens, don't pretend you don't know. Expressing your support is important, so you don't end up in awkward situations where both of you know, but no one addresses it. It's best to initiate contact directly. You can do this in person or through a message.

If you decide to talk in person, don't do it in a hurry, in the corridor, or among other people. Find a private moment to approach them, either in their office or another quiet place. You could say:

"I heard about your illness."

"Kasia told me you're not well."

"I know you've received a cancer diagnosis."

After this, express your support in your own way or use the earlier phrases. I know this can be challenging, and it might feel easier to avoid the conversation. However, I encourage you to find the courage to initiate it—but never force yourself if it doesn't feel right.

You could also reach out through email, text, or a message on a communication platform. If possible, try to contact them outside of work hours. Avoid calling between meetings or sending a message only to show up shortly after asking for a signature on some document. Compose your message with care, and many of the suggestions in this guide can help you decide what to say.

This is a common situation. Someone at work may start wearing a wig that resembles their usual hairstyle, lose weight rapidly, or gain weight suddenly. They might have mood swings, leave work early, take frequent sick leave, or show reduced efficiency—or they might take on every task they can. All signs may point to cancer, but the person says nothing. Should you bring it up? Yes. You can try, focusing on "I" statements such as:

"I've noticed something seems different. You don't have to tell me anything, but if you want to talk, I'm here."

"It seems like you might not be feeling well. If you want to talk, I'm available, but if not, I understand."

"I feel like something's wrong, and it might be about your health. You have my support and discretion if you need it."

If the response is to exit the conversation or brush you off, don't press the issue, and don't take offense—the topic is extremely difficult, and the person likely intended to keep it unaddressed at work. Should you attempt to raise it, then? Yes, you should. Often, such a gesture is worth more than a bag of diamonds for both sides.

How and what to talk about?

Cancer is not a cold that you forget a few weeks after the diagnosis. Regardless of the cancer's location, stage, treatment path, or its effects, the illness stays in some way forever—in new self-awareness, physical limitations, regular checkups, and unfortunately, sometimes in recurrences and metastases. The disease has a dynamic character—information, planned treatments, and well-being change. The first conversation I mentioned earlier will likely be just one of many. So, it's worth knowing what to say and what to avoid.

First and foremost, ask questions such as:

"How are you feeling?"

"Any updates about your health?"

"Do you want to talk during the break?"

"I'm not sure how to behave around you. Can you help me?"

"Is there anything I should avoid talking about?"

This approach offers double benefits—it shows support and interest while also helping you understand how to act around the person.

Express your hope, inform them about your support, and offer a warm smile. Most importantly, listen—this is often the most crucial part. Avoid predicting the future ("It will be fine"), claiming to know how they feel ("I know how you feel"), framing the illness as a battle ("You'll beat it"), giving orders ("You must stay strong"), pointing out past mistakes ("You should have quit smoking"), dramatizing ("It's a nightmare, a tragedy!"), offering unsolicited medical advice ("I know a great supplement"), or sharing irrelevant stories ("My aunt had cancer too").

Also, don't force the person into the role of "the patient." Yes, the cancer matters now, but this is still the same person they were before. Ask them about their children, their dog, new clothes, or their thoughts on an email from a client. Talk about normal things and share what's happening in your life. It's all about balance.

How to behave?

Navigating workplace behavior with someone who has cancer involves balancing two things: maintaining a sense of old normalcy—avoiding cancer discussions, doing work tasks, and treating the person as you always have—and providing support, asking how they're doing, and being lenient when necessary. It's not an easy art to master. However, your goal isn't perfection—just to do your best based on your abilities and the situation at hand.

It's crucial that the person with cancer doesn't feel excluded or labeled as different. Often, people hear and notice more than we think when they're the topic of behind-the-scenes discussions. So don't gossip, whisper, or speculate.

Imagine walking down the hallway toward the break room. You hear bursts of laughter coming from inside, but as soon as you step through the door, everyone falls silent, their eyes glued to their lunch boxes. Horrible, right? You wouldn't believe how many people with cancer have told me about similar experiences. Please, don't fall silent, look away, or pretend the person and their illness don't exist. Try to behave normally while adding a layer of support.

How to offer help?

Personally, I have an issue with the phrase, "Let me know if you need anything." It feels more like a polite formality, as meaningful as saying, "It's nice in the sun, but chilly in the shade." So, let's start with a bit of psycho-oncological theory! Support comes in two forms: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental support helps with organizing daily life, while emotional support eases feelings of loneliness. It's best to approach each type of support separately. Concrete offers—clearly aligned with one category—make your intentions clear and avoid ambiguity.

Here are some examples of **instrumental** support:

"I'm free every afternoon next week and have a full tank of gas. Can I drive you somewhere?"

"I'm making a pasta casserole this weekend. I'll prepare an extra dish for you—can I bring it on Monday for your family to enjoy?"

"I know your surgery is coming up, so I rearranged my workload. I'd like to finish that project for you so you can have the afternoon off to spend with your kids. Would that be okay?"

And for **emotional** support:

"It's hard to talk at work. Are you free tomorrow afternoon? Maybe we can grab some coffee and tiramisu—there's a great bakery nearby."

"Tomek, Zosia, and I want to meet at Zosia's place and have a relaxed chat. Would you like to join us? You'll finally get to meet her crazy cat!"

"Would you like a hug?"

Separating these two types of support can also protect you. If you don't have the time to offer transportation or meals, you can focus on emotional support. If the situation feels too overwhelming or you don't know the person well enough for personal conversations, stick to instrumental actions. Remember, helping isn't your obligation, but most people feel good when they support someone in need. Also, just being there, offering a few kind words or smiles, is often more than enough.

However, don't push. A person with cancer has a lot on their mind—they may want to be alone, spend time with family, or simply not have the energy or desire for interaction. If you sense it's time to step back, do so. Don't insist by saying, "I'll pick you up at 10 tomorrow, no excuses!" or assume you know what's best for them.

One last thing—helping someone with cancer can stir up difficult emotions. Tears may flow over tiramisu, and you might hear questions like, "Why me and not that awful Jolka from HR?" A drive to the hospital might mean hearing bad test results. But simply being there is invaluable.

What makes a good gift?

A shocking subtitle, right? At first glance, yes. I first got this question on Instagram about two years ago. It's a common dilemma: Someone with cancer takes extended leave to undergo treatment or leaves work altogether because they don't have the strength to continue. Or maybe they've just received the diagnosis, and you want to help. So, you decide to pool some money for a nice gift. You have a few hundred zlotys, but suddenly, every idea seems wrong. A book about cancer? "No way, that's rude! Besides, haven't they had enough of that topic?" Exercise equipment? "They love sports, but are they still able to work out?" A soft blanket? "No, that would imply they'll just lie in bed—what if they take it the wrong way?" A giant stuffed horse, as an inside joke? "There's nothing funny about cancer!" Italian treats? "But can they eat that?"

Okay, stop. Let's take a moment to breathe. The person with cancer likely doesn't have the energy to interpret your kind gestures as offensive or problematic. They will appreciate the thought and feel touched! It's perfectly normal that you don't know what would be the best gift—after all, you don't know the full impact of the treatment or their prognosis. In the worst case, their family will enjoy the Italian treats, and the blanket will be used for picnics.

Now that you have a better mindset, here's a list of gift ideas specifically designed with input from people with cancer (yes, it sounds a bit strange, but bear with me). The ideal gift package contains at least one item from each category:

Book suggestions: "Here, enjoy some reading and rest—we all signed the first page instead of a card"

- About cancer: "Oswoić raka" by Adrianna Sobol and Agnieszka Witkowicz-Matolicz
- About psycho-oncology: "ABC Twoich emocji" by Maultsby, Wirga, and DeBernardi
- On life and happiness: "Pokochaj swoje serce" by Dagmara Skalska
- Inspiring reads: "Mocne rozmowy" by Aneta Pondo
- Everyday life stories: "Też tak mam" by Magdalena Kostyszyn

Something related to cancer: "We're not ignoring the topic, we just want to help"

- Specialized cosmetics: hair growth serum or protective cream for radiated skin
- Voucher for permanent makeup (if they experience hair loss)
- Scarf or hat (if hair loss occurs)
- Voucher for Simonton Therapy (but first ask if they're interested)
- Voucher for a nutritional consultation
- Massage voucher for oncology patients

Something to boost their well-being, unrelated to cancer: "We care about your comfort and happiness"

- Bath or self-care set
- Tea or coffee set
- Potted flowers
- Artwork (painting, poster, or graphic print)
- DIY kits (crochet set, puzzles, or model kits)
- A shared photo

Gifts related to the illness are perfectly fine as long as they don't promote alternative cures (e.g., "How to Cure Cancer with Chickpeas") or suggest it's time to give up (e.g., an anti-bed sore pillow—unless truly needed). Non-cancer-related gifts are also great, as long as they don't require extraordinary effort (e.g., bungee jumping), immediate travel (e.g., a week in the mountains), or invasive procedures (e.g., a voucher for cosmetic surgery). As a rule, I recommend avoiding food or drink—trust me, the digestive system can behave unpredictably during treatment.

One sad note. If the person passes away, it's worth pooling money again to offer financial support to their family. Other forms of help—like assistance with formalities—may also be needed.

What about work responsibilities?

Should someone with cancer work less? Should they be relieved of certain tasks? What about physically demanding duties? Or perhaps it's better to keep them busy to distract them from the illness and help them earn more? There are no clear answers to these questions, but I want to provide some key theoretical insights.

Sometimes, when you have the flu, you might feel up to taking a walk in the forest with a thermos of tea, but you can't manage to reply to emails, right? Cancer is also a disease, and chemotherapy or radiation can feel like the worst flu multiplied by three. During my chemotherapy, I managed to attend a techno party (I sat through the whole thing, but I was there) and a tattoo convention, but I struggled to make myself a sandwich—let alone complete a photography assignment. I can't explain it—perhaps the body knows what will give it energy and improve well-being, and what will be emotionally or intellectually draining.

Please don't suspect someone with cancer of slacking off if they miss a project deadline but post a photo from a lakeside trip on Instagram over the weekend. Believe me, cancer is a terrible disease, not an excuse to slack off.

Stay in regular contact and adjust work responsibilities as needed. Changes can happen in both directions—"I need to start chemo immediately, so I'll be out" or "I'm going crazy at home, give me another project."

One final tip: you can always reach out to a psycho-oncologist, either individually or as a group, remotely or in person. Don't hesitate to call the Rak'n'Roll Foundation hotline (Wednesdays, 7:00-9:00 PM) at 604 51 51 51 or other similar numbers. You can also write to me directly. You'll get through this!

You can also find this text at: agaszuscik.com/post/rak-przy-biurku-obok

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