

Supporting working carers

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

Many people who care for someone with cancer are also employed. Your employees will need your support to help them balance their caring responsibilities with their job. Providing this support can help you to retain experienced staff, foster organisational loyalty, and increase staff morale. This fact sheet provides some suggestions about how to help your employees manage working and caring.

Who is a working carer?

A working carer is a person who provides support to someone with an illness or disability, such as cancer, while in paid employment. A carer may be looking after his or her spouse or partner, parent or in-law, child, grandparent, sibling, other close relative, friend or neighbour.

Often the person becomes the primary carer of the person with cancer without necessarily identifying him or herself as a 'carer'. Rather, the carer may see it as simply helping out a family member or friend in need.

Many people become carers while they are employed. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are about 1.33 million carers in Australia who are also in paid employment.¹

The combination of caring and workplace responsibilities places particular demands on a person's time, energy and personal resources.

Carers who are employed may be reluctant to tell their employers about their caring responsibilities because they fear it may negatively affect their employment. However, a supportive work environment can make it easier for a working carer to manage the situation.

The carer's juggling act

As well as the usual responsibilities of home and work, a carer will often be providing practical and emotional support to the patient. In addition to tasks that directly support the patient, such as driving them to medical appointments, a carer may have to take on additional domestic duties that the patient can no longer do, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and childcare. Juggling these demands, along with workplace responsibilities, can be very stressful.

Caring can also be an emotional roller-coaster. A person looking after someone with cancer will have to manage their own feelings. These may include grief, fear, loneliness, frustration, guilt or anger about the situation. Research has also found that those who care for cancer patients are more likely to suffer from depression than the cancer patients themselves.

Supporting carers

Carers are not required to tell their employers that they have caring responsibilities. However, if you are aware that an employee is caring for someone with cancer, it can be helpful for both of you to discuss the situation. There are a number of ways you may be able to provide support:

- Discuss whether the carer wants colleagues to know of the situation, and if so, agree on how it should be communicated.
- Facilitate flexible work hours if possible, so that the carer can attend medical appointments or pick up children if required.
- Talk about when the carer is likely to need to take leave so that you can plan to cover any absences. Check they are aware of their leave entitlements.
- Make a record of any agreed changes to the employee's working arrangements or conditions.

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- Be aware that the carer may need unplanned time off at short notice. Treatment schedules, for example, do not always go exactly as planned.
- Enable the carer to work from home sometimes. Be aware of the workplace health and safety requirements of working from home.
- If appropriate and the carer agrees, consider whether it is possible to temporarily reallocate some of their normal work duties.
- If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), ensure it has appropriate information in relation to managing cancer at work, and encourage the carer to access the counselling service. As a manager, you may also find it helpful to use the EAP counselling service.
- Regularly check in with the carer to discuss how any flexible arrangements are working out, and to assess if the situation has changed.

The support and assistance you are able to provide will depend on the carer's role and the organisation. For example, some jobs may not be conducive to working from home.

Who is covered?

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, carer's leave is available for:

- **immediate family members** – an employee's spouse, de facto partner, child, parent, grandparent, grandchild, sibling (or the child, parent, grandparent, grandchild or sibling of the employee's spouse or de facto partner)
- **household members** – any person who lives with the employee.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* also protects carers of people with cancer from workplace discrimination, including family members (spouse, de facto partner and other relatives) and unrelated carers who provide assistance to a person affected by cancer. State and territory anti-discrimination laws generally provide similar protection, except in the Northern Territory.

Leave entitlements in Australia

Under the National Employment Standards (NES), most permanent full-time employees are entitled to a minimum of 10 days of paid personal/carer's leave each year, including sick leave. Permanent part-time employees are entitled to a pro-rata amount of paid personal/carer's leave, based on their work hours. Unused paid personal/carer's leave is carried over to subsequent years.

Once paid personal/carer's leave has been used, each time the person requires care, the carer is entitled to an additional two days of unpaid carer's leave for caring duties. Both casual and permanent employees are entitled to unpaid carer's leave. Some individual employers also provide additional unpaid carer's leave. Carers may also use their annual leave, then any long service leave to which they are entitled.

Permanent employees are also entitled to two days of paid compassionate leave to spend time with a member of their immediate family who has a life-threatening illness, regardless of whether the employee is the primary carer. Casual employees are entitled to unpaid compassionate leave.

An employee is required to notify their employer of an inability to work as soon as practicable. The employer may require evidence to substantiate the reason for the leave (e.g. a medical certificate or statutory declaration), as specified by the organisation's policies, awards, contracts or workplace agreements.

Employer obligations

Employers are legally obligated by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate employees with carer's responsibilities, as long as the adjustments do not cause an unjustifiable hardship to the business.

These adjustments could be administrative, environmental or procedural, and they could be temporary or long-term. They could include making minor changes to your employee's work duties, reducing their work hours, approving flexible working arrangements or providing additional equipment. Seek advice from your human resource department or adviser about adjustments in specific cases.

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In addition to the protections provided by the *Disability Discrimination Act*, under the National Employment Standards employees who have at least 12 months of continuous service have the right to request flexible working arrangements to manage caring responsibilities.

These may include allowing employees to work from home or from another worksite; changing their start, finish or break times; or allowing employees to reduce their work hours. For example, a carer may wish to start work early in order to leave early to take the patient to a medical appointment. Employers can only refuse such requests on reasonable business grounds.

How colleagues can help

If a working carer's colleagues are aware of the situation, they may want to do something to help. See the *Supporting a colleague with cancer* fact sheet for some practical tips and suggestions.

“At first, I didn't ask for help, because I didn't want to bother anyone. I see caring as my duty; I have to do it. I now realise people genuinely want to help. They need my help to show them how.”  Gavin

References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015*, Canberra, ABS, 2016.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – *Supporting a colleague with cancer; Talking to an employee with cancer; Death and bereavement* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*. These online only fact sheets are available from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Call Cancer Council 13 11 20** – for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can also ask for free copies of our booklets, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Fair Work Ombudsman** – fairwork.gov.au; 13 13 94
- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – humanrights.gov.au; 1300 656 419
- **Carers Australia** – carersaustralia.com.au; 1800 242 636
- **Working Carers Gateway** – workingcarers.org.au

Cancer Council websites

ACT.....	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT.....	nt.cancer.org.au
Queensland	cancerqld.org.au
SA.....	cancersa.org.au
Tasmania	cancertas.org.au
Victoria	cancervic.org.au
WA.....	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia	cancer.org.au

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.



For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council 13 11 20. This is a confidential service.