

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 duties. 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 combines paid employment with unpaid care and support to someone with an illness or disability, such as cancer. A carer may be looking after their 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 as a “carer”. Rather, the carer may see it as simply helping out a family member or friend in need.

Many workers become carers. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are about 2.65 million carers in Australia who are also in paid employment.¹ Balancing caring and working puts extra demands on an employee’s time and energy. A supportive work environment can make it easier for a working carer to manage the situation.

The carer’s juggling act

Caring often involves a wide range of tasks, including practical, medical, emotional, legal and financial support. This may involve new duties such as driving the person with cancer to medical appointments, and taking on additional duties that they can no longer do, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and child care. Juggling these demands can be stressful, especially if the carer is also working.

Caring can also be an emotional roller-coaster. An employee looking after someone with cancer may feel grief, fear, loneliness, frustration, guilt or anger about the situation. Research shows that carers are more likely to experience depression than the person diagnosed with cancer.

Supporting carers

Carers are not legally required to tell their employers about their caring responsibilities. An employee may not tell their employer about their caring responsibilities because they fear it may negatively affect their employment.

If you are aware that an employee is caring for someone with cancer, you can offer support. What is possible will vary depending on the employee’s role.

- Ask whether the working carer wants to share the situation with co-workers, and if so, agree on how it should be communicated.
- Arrange flexible work hours if possible, so that the carer can attend medical appointments or pickup children if required.
- Discuss what leave the working carer is likely to take 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.
- Keep in mind that the carer may need time off at short notice. Treatment schedules, for example, do not always go exactly as planned.
- Enable the carer to work from home sometimes if possible. Be aware of the workplace health and safety requirements of working from home.

Supporting working carers

- If appropriate and the carer agrees, consider whether it is possible to temporarily reallocate some of their normal work duties.
- If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), ensure EAP personnel have appropriate information about 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.

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. This includes family members (spouse, de facto partner and other relatives) and unrelated carers who provide assistance to a person affected by cancer. Contact your state or territory anti-discrimination organisation to see whether they provide similar protection.

Leave entitlements in Australia

Personal/carer's leave – Under the National Employment Standards, most permanent full-time employees are entitled to a minimum of 10 days of paid personal/carer's leave each year. This used to be called sick leave. Permanent part-time employees are entitled to a pro-rata (proportional) amount of paid personal/carer's leave, based on the number of hours they work. Unused leave days carry over from year to year.

Annual leave – Carers may also use their annual leave (four weeks a year for full-time employees), then any long service leave to which they're entitled.

Unpaid leave – 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.

Compassionate leave – 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 person's 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 proof 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 resources department or adviser about adjustments in specific cases.


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.

Supporting working carers

Flexible working arrangements 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 and leave early to be able to take the person affected by cancer to a medical appointment. Employers can only refuse such requests on reasonable business grounds.

How co-workers can help

If a working carer's co-workers 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, *4430.0 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018*. Available from: abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4430.0.

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Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. 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.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets such as *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*, *Supporting a colleague with cancer*, *Talking to your employee about cancer* and *Death and bereavement* are available on your local Cancer Council website.
- **Cancer Council 13 11 20** – Call for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets on cancer treatments and side effects, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Carer Gateway** – carergateway.gov.au; 1800 422 737
- **Carers Australia** – carersaustralia.com.au; 1800 242 636
- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – humanrights.gov.au; 1300 656 419
- **Fair Work Ombudsman** – fairwork.gov.au; 13 13 94

Cancer Council websites

ACT..... actcancer.org
 NSW cancercouncil.com.au
 NT nt.cancer.org.au
 QLD cancerqld.org.au
 SA..... cancersa.org.au
 TAS cancertas.org.au
 VIC cancervic.org.au
 WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
 Australia..... cancer.org.au



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