



Supporting Employees Following a Cancer Diagnosis

Helping HR teams understand the reality of life beyond appointments and between treatments.

Signature Reflection

"Cancer treatment happens in appointments. Life continues in between them. Understanding both is where compassionate workplaces make the greatest difference."



Welcome

A message from Sandie Dennis



One of the greatest privileges of my work is walking alongside employees through some of life's most significant transitions.

A cancer diagnosis is one of those moments. It changes far more than someone's physical health.

It can affect confidence, identity, relationships, finances, future plans and how someone experiences work.

Over the years, I've learnt that many managers genuinely want to offer the right support but worry about saying the wrong thing. HR teams often tell me they don't want to overwhelm someone by asking too much, yet they also don't want employees to feel forgotten.

The reassuring truth is this...

Employees rarely expect managers to have all the answers.

What they remember most is feeling seen. Feeling listened to. Feeling understood. Feeling supported without judgement.

That's why we've created this guide.

Not to provide a script, but to help HR professionals and managers better understand what employees may be experiencing, feel more confident having compassionate conversations and create workplaces where people don't feel they have to navigate a cancer diagnosis alone.

Every diagnosis is different. Every treatment journey is different. Every person is different.

But kindness, flexibility and understanding can make an extraordinary difference to someone's experience of work.

Sometimes it's the smallest moments of understanding that people remember most.

I hope this guide helps your organisation feel more confident supporting employees through one of life's most challenging health journeys.

Warm wishes,

Sandie Dennis

Founder

BeyondEAP

? Reflection

If one of your employees received a cancer diagnosis tomorrow, how confident would your managers feel supporting them?

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How to Use This Guide

A cancer diagnosis affects far more than medical appointments.

Every employee's experience will be shaped by factors including:

- The type of cancer.
- Their treatment.
- Their prognosis.
- Their personal circumstances.
- Their support network.
- Their own preferences about work.

There is no "typical" cancer journey.

This guide has been created to help HR professionals, People teams and line managers approach these situations with greater confidence, compassion and practical understanding.

Rather than providing rigid rules, it offers practical guidance, conversation starters and workplace considerations that can be adapted to each employee's individual needs.

The most effective support begins by recognising that every experience is unique.

This guide may help you:

- ✓ Before meeting with an employee.
- ✓ Supporting line managers.
- ✓ Planning workplace adjustments.
- ✓ During HR case discussions.
- ✓ Alongside absence and wellbeing policies.
- ✓ As part of manager development.
- ✓ To build confidence across your organisation.

Throughout this guide you'll find:



Beyond EAP Insight

Professional observations drawn from supporting employees through life-changing health events.



Conversation Starter

Practical language managers can adapt when beginning sensitive conversations.



Practical Tip

Simple actions that can immediately improve an employee's experience at work.



Reflection

Questions to encourage discussion within HR teams and leadership groups.



Team Discussion

Conversation prompts for HR meetings and manager workshops.



Beyond EAP Insight

Every diagnosis is unique. The most supportive workplaces resist assumptions and remain curious about each employee's individual experience.

Why This Guide Matters

Every year, employees across the UK receive cancer diagnoses whilst continuing to navigate their working lives.

Some may need extended time away from work.

Others may continue working throughout treatment.

Some may return quickly.

Others may face months, or years, of adjustment.

No two experiences are ever the same.

What many employees have in common, however, is trying to balance one of the biggest events of their lives whilst continuing to navigate everyday responsibilities.

Meetings still happen.

Emails still arrive.

Children still need collecting from school.

Friends still send messages.

Bills still need paying.

Life doesn't pause because treatment begins.

The world keeps turning.

Understanding this reality is one of the most important things HR professionals and managers can appreciate.

Support isn't simply about responding to appointments or periods of absence.

It's about recognising the person behind the diagnosis and creating a workplace where they feel able to ask for help without fear of judgement.

Employees often tell us they don't want sympathy.

They want understanding.

They don't want assumptions.

They want flexibility.

And above all, they want to continue being seen as the person they were before their diagnosis—not defined by it.

Beyond EAP Insight

A cancer diagnosis may become part of someone's story. It should never become their entire identity at work.

Reflection

Do your managers automatically think about absence when they hear the word "cancer", or do they also think about the employee's day-to-day experience between treatments?

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At a Glance

Employees may be feeling...

- ✓ Shock
- ✓ Uncertainty
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Determination
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Loss of confidence
- ✓ Hope

Managers often worry about...

- ✓ Saying the wrong thing.
- ✓ Discussing cancer.
- ✓ Becoming emotional.
- ✓ Managing workload.
- ✓ Supporting fairly.

Employees often need...

- ✓ Flexibility.
- ✓ Honest conversations.
- ✓ Understanding.
- ✓ Regular check-ins.
- ✓ Psychological safety.
- ✓ Permission to have difficult days.
- ✓ Their identity recognised beyond the diagnosis.

Remember

The diagnosis may be medical.
The experience is deeply personal.

Beyond EAP Insight

The diagnosis may be the same. The experience never is.

Reflection

How confident are your managers in adapting their support as an employee's needs change over time?

Life Continues Between Treatments

The reality managers don't always see

When people think about cancer treatment, they often picture hospital appointments.

Chemotherapy.

Radiotherapy.

Surgery.

Consultant meetings.

These moments are undoubtedly significant.

But they are only part of the story.

Between treatments...

Beyond EAP Insight

Cancer treatment happens in appointments. Life continues in between them.

Compassionate workplaces recognise both.

Practical Tip

Rather than asking only about treatment, ask:

"How are you managing everything that's happening around your treatment?"

It acknowledges the whole person—not just the diagnosis.

Reflection

When you think about supporting an employee with cancer, do you picture their hospital appointments—or their everyday life between them?

Life continues.

Employees still wake up each morning.

They make breakfast.

Reply to emails.

Join Teams meetings.

Take children to school.

Walk the dog.

Pay the mortgage.

Support ageing parents.

Attend birthdays.

Laugh with colleagues.

Try to sleep.

Wonder what tomorrow's scan will bring.

Smile politely when colleagues ask how they are.

Celebrate small victories.

All whilst carrying the uncertainty of scan results, treatment side effects and questions about the future.

It's these **ordinary moments** that often require extraordinary resilience.

The workplace may only see the appointment in the diary.

The employee experiences everything that happens in between.

Understanding this changes the conversation.

It shifts support away from simply accommodating appointments and towards recognising the whole person.

The Beyond EAP Perspective

It's easy for organisations to focus on appointments, treatment plans and time away from work.

Our experience tells us something different.

Employees often remember the ordinary moments just as vividly.

The colleague who quietly asked how they were.

The manager who checked in after a scan.

The flexibility that allowed them to attend an appointment without feeling guilty.

The conversation that reminded them they were still valued.

Support isn't built through policies alone.

Policies create consistency.

Relationships create confidence.

Support is built through trust.

Through consistency.

Through everyday conversations.

Sometimes those ordinary moments become the most extraordinary acts of support.



Beyond EAP Insight

Employees rarely expect managers to have all the answers. They remember whether someone cared enough to ask.



Reflection

Would your employees feel safe enough to tell you when today feels harder than yesterday?

Well-Meaning... But Unhelpful

Starting the Conversation

Most comments that cause upset are made with kindness. Managers naturally want to offer reassurance and hope. But some well-meaning phrases can unintentionally minimise what an employee is experiencing.

Well-Meaning... But Unhelpful

- ✗ "You look really well."
- ✗ "At least they caught it early."
- ✗ "Stay positive."
- ✗ "You'll be back to normal in no time."
- ✗ "I know exactly how you feel."
- ✗ "You're so brave."
- ✗ "Everything happens for a reason."
- ✗ "Just let us know if you need anything."

More Supportive Alternatives

- ✓ "Thank you for telling me."
- ✓ "I'm really glad you've shared this with me."
- ✓ "How would you like us to support you?"
- ✓ "What would make work feel more manageable at the moment?"
- ✓ "Would it help if we reviewed things together regularly?"
- ✓ "There's no expectation for you to have all the answers today."
- ✓ "I'm here to support you in whatever way feels most helpful."

Sometimes the most compassionate response is simply acknowledging that you don't have the perfect words.

That honesty often creates more trust than trying to find them.

Beyond EAP Insight

People rarely remember whether you found the perfect words. They remember whether they felt genuinely cared for.

Reflection

Are your managers trying to reassure employees... or helping them feel understood?

Practical Tip

Avoid making assumptions based on appearance.

Some employees may look well whilst experiencing significant fatigue, pain or anxiety.

Others may prefer not to discuss their treatment at all.

Let the employee decide how much they'd like to share.

Follow their lead.

The Hidden Impact Beyond Treatment

Not every impact of cancer is visible

Some changes are physical.

Others are emotional.

Many remain completely unseen.

Employees may experience:

- Fatigue that doesn't improve with rest.
- "Chemo brain" or difficulty concentrating.
- Anxiety before scans or test results ("scanxiety").
- Changes in confidence and identity.
- Worries about letting colleagues down.
- Financial concerns.
- Fear of being treated differently.
- Uncertainty about the future.
- Worry about becoming "the person with cancer."
- Feeling guilty about the impact on colleagues.
- A desire to feel "normal" despite everything happening.

Some employees will talk openly about these challenges.

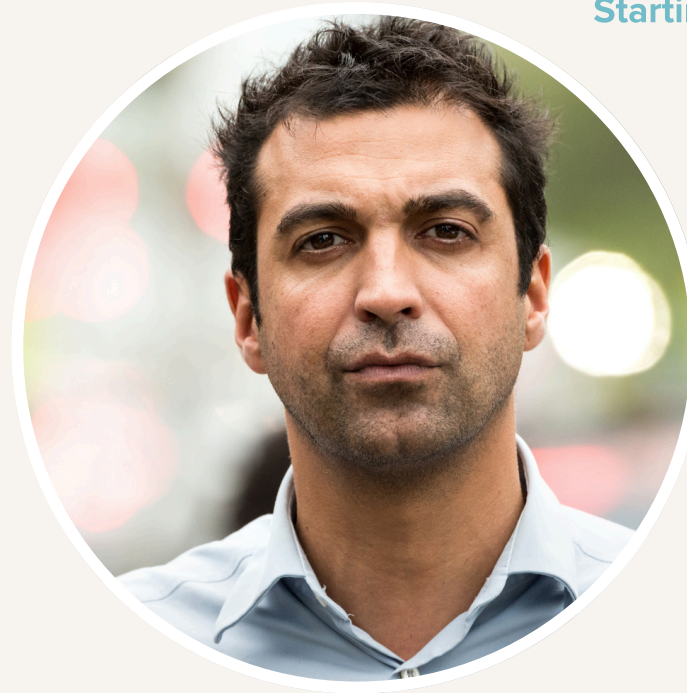
Others won't mention them at all.

Some may work incredibly hard to protect others from worrying about them.

They may continue performing well whilst quietly using every ounce of energy simply to get through the day.

Recognising these hidden impacts helps managers move beyond assumptions and towards meaningful support.

Starting the Conversation



Beyond EAP Insight

Employees don't always need others to understand exactly how they feel. They simply want to know they won't have to hide it.

Conversation Starter

"Everyone's experience is different. I'd really like to understand what work feels like for you at the moment and whether there's anything we can do to make things easier."

Reflection

Could an employee in your organisation be working twice as hard simply to appear as though everything is normal?

Supporting Employees Throughout Their Cancer Journey

Support isn't a single conversation

One of the biggest misconceptions about supporting an employee with cancer is that it begins with the diagnosis and ends when treatment finishes.

In reality, support is rarely linear.

An employee's needs are likely to change throughout their journey.

Some weeks they may feel positive and energised.

Others may feel physically exhausted, emotionally overwhelmed or anxious about the future.

There may be periods where work provides a welcome sense of normality.

At other times, even everyday tasks may feel significantly more challenging.

Rather than assuming an employee will tell you when they need help, create opportunities for regular, compassionate conversations.

Support isn't about checking progress.

It's about checking in.

Practical Ways to Offer Support

Consider:

- Agreeing how and when you'd like to check in.
- Offering flexibility around treatment and appointments.
- Reviewing workload regularly.
- Being open to changing needs over time.
- Respecting confidentiality and agreeing what colleagues should know.
- Remembering that energy levels may fluctuate from week to week.
- Asking the employee how they'd like to be supported, rather than assuming what would help.

The most effective support isn't built around assumptions.

It's built around ongoing conversations.

Beyond EAP Insight

Support isn't measured by what happens during appointments. It's measured by how someone feels supported in between them. In many ways, that's when it becomes even more important.

Practical Tip

Rather than asking:

"Are you okay?"

Try asking:

"How has work felt for you this week?"

It opens the conversation without placing pressure on someone to say they're fine.

Reflection

"What if I say the wrong thing?"

The reassuring answer is...

Employees rarely expect perfect words. They expect honesty. They appreciate kindness. And they remember feeling genuinely listened to. The purpose of the conversation isn't to understand every detail of someone's diagnosis.

It's to understand what support they need at work.

Starting the Conversation

Building Psychological Safety

Creating a workplace where employees don't have to pretend

A cancer diagnosis changes far more than someone's physical health.

It can affect confidence.

Identity.

Relationships.

Memory.

Energy.

How someone sees themselves.

It can also change how safe they feel asking for support.

One of the greatest gifts a workplace can offer is psychological safety.

A place where an employee feels able to say:

"Today's a difficult day."

"I'm feeling exhausted after treatment."

"I'm struggling to concentrate."

"I'm anxious about tomorrow's scan."

...without worrying they'll be judged, treated differently or seen as less capable.

Psychological safety isn't about lowering expectations.

It's about creating an environment where employees don't feel they have to hide what they're experiencing.

They also don't feel they have to pretend they're coping better than they are.

When people feel safe enough to be honest, they're far more likely to ask for support before they begin to struggle.

That benefits everyone.

Beyond EAP Insight

Psychological safety isn't created by one conversation. It's built every time someone feels able to tell the truth about how they're really doing.

Practical Tip

Remember that honesty isn't always immediate.

Some employees may need several conversations before they feel comfortable sharing how they're really coping.

Creating a safe environment today may be what allows an employee to ask for help weeks or months later.

Reflection

Would an employee in your organisation feel comfortable saying, "I'm not coping very well today"?



One Question to Take Back to Your Team

When we think about supporting cancer, we often focus on treatment.

Hospital appointments.

Time away from work.

Recovery.

But much of someone's experience happens in the ordinary moments between those events.

Take five minutes during your next HR or manager meeting to discuss this question.

How can we better recognise the everyday challenges employees may be carrying that aren't immediately visible?

Sometimes the most meaningful workplace support begins with what isn't immediately obvious.



Team Discussion

What could your organisation do differently to help employees feel supported on the ordinary days—not just the difficult ones?

Beyond EAP Action Checklist

Before the Conversation

- ☐ Arrange somewhere private.
- ☐ Allow enough time.
- ☐ Avoid interruptions.
- ☐ Don't make assumptions about the employee's diagnosis or treatment.
- ☐ Remember every cancer journey is different.

During the Conversation

- ☐ Thank the employee for sharing.
- ☐ Listen more than you speak.
- ☐ Ask open questions.
- ☐ Ask what a "good day at work" currently looks like.
- ☐ Agree how communication will work.
- ☐ Respect confidentiality.
- ☐ Avoid trying to "fix" the situation.
- ☐ Ask what support would feel most helpful.

Throughout Treatment

- ☐ Check in regularly.
- ☐ Review workload together.
- ☐ Offer flexibility where possible.
- ☐ Recognise changing needs.
- ☐ Remember that energy levels may fluctuate significantly from week to week.
- ☐ Don't assume that looking well means feeling well.

Preparing for Return to Work

- ☐ Begin conversations early.
- ☐ Review adjustments together.
- ☐ Consider a phased return where appropriate.
- ☐ Continue regular check-ins.
- ☐ Remember recovery often continues long after treatment has ended.

Beyond Return to Work

- ☐ Continue asking how work feels.
- ☐ Recognise that confidence may take time to rebuild.
- ☐ Don't assume life immediately returns to normal.
- ☐ Keep communication open.

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Beyond EAP Insight

Recovery isn't measured by returning to work. It's measured by feeling able to thrive once you're there.



Team Discussion

If every manager in your organisation followed this checklist, what difference would it make to an employee living with cancer?

When Specialist Support Can Help

Supporting an employee through cancer doesn't mean expecting managers to become medical experts, counsellors or therapists.

Their role is to create a compassionate, psychologically safe workplace where employees feel listened to, understood and supported.

Sometimes, however, employees may benefit from specialist support alongside the workplace support they're receiving.

Knowing when to signpost can make a significant difference to an employee's wellbeing and recovery.

At Beyond EAP, we regularly support employees who are navigating:

- ✓ Coming to terms with a new diagnosis.
- ✓ The emotional impact of treatment.
- ✓ Anxiety around scans, appointments and uncertainty.
- ✓ Changes in confidence and identity.
- ✓ Returning to work following treatment.
- ✓ Balancing work, family and personal responsibilities.
- ✓ Emotional support throughout diagnosis, treatment and recovery.
- ✓ Family and relationship challenges.
- ✓ Supporting managers navigating difficult conversations.

Specialist support isn't about replacing the role of HR or line managers.

It's about ensuring employees have somewhere safe to process the emotional impact of what they're experiencing, whilst enabling workplaces to continue providing compassionate, practical support.



Beyond EAP Insight

Sometimes the greatest support a workplace can offer is recognising when someone needs support beyond the workplace.



Reflection

If one of your employees needed specialist emotional support tomorrow, would your managers know where to signpost them?

Continue Your Learning

One guide can start a conversation.

Building compassionate workplaces is an ongoing journey.

Our HR Knowledge Hub brings together practical guides and specialist insights designed to help organisations support employees through life's biggest workplace transitions.

HR Guides

- Real HR Challenges
- Supporting Employees from Pregnancy Announcement to Parental Leave
- Supporting Employees Through Pregnancy After Loss
- Supporting Employees Following a Cancer Diagnosis

Insights

- Life Continues Between Treatments
- Supporting Employees After a Health Diagnosis at Work
- Why Post-Diagnosis Support Matters More Than Ever
- The Hidden Impact of Hearing Loss at Work

Manager Workshops

Helping managers confidently support employees through life's biggest workplace transitions.

Including:

- Compassionate conversations.
- Supporting employees following diagnosis.
- Pregnancy, parenthood and family transitions.
- Bereavement and trauma.
- Building psychologically safe workplaces.

Explore the Beyond EAP HR Knowledge Hub

A growing collection of:

- ✓ Practical guidance.
- ✓ Compassionate conversations.
- ✓ Specialist support.

Designed for HR professionals, managers and organisations who recognise that life doesn't stop outside the workplace.

www.beyondeap.co.uk/insights-and-resources

Key Takeaways

Supporting employees following a cancer diagnosis isn't about having every answer. It's about creating a workplace where people feel safe enough to have honest conversations and ask for support when they need it.

Remember:

- ✓ Every cancer journey is unique.
- ✓ Support should evolve as an employee's needs change.
- ✓ Managers are expected to support—not solve.
- ✓ Compassionate conversations build trust.
- ✓ Psychological safety encourages openness.
- ✓ Small conversations often make the biggest difference.
- ✓ Recovery continues long after treatment ends.
- ✓ Employees want to be seen as people—not defined by their diagnosis.

Final Reflection

Behind every treatment plan is a person.
Someone trying to continue living their life.
Someone balancing hospital appointments with everyday responsibilities.
Someone hoping to retain a sense of normality whilst navigating uncertainty.
As HR professionals and managers, we can't change someone's diagnosis.
But we can change how supported they feel whilst living with it.
We can choose curiosity over assumption.
Compassion over discomfort.
Connection over silence.
Because while treatment happens in appointments...

Life continues in between them.

And those ordinary days are often where compassionate workplaces make the greatest difference.



Why Organisations Choose Beyond EAP

Supporting employees through life's biggest transitions requires more than policies.

It requires confidence. Compassion. And specialist expertise.

Beyond EAP works alongside organisations to help employees, managers and HR teams navigate complex life events with practical guidance and expert support.

Our Specialist Areas



Post-Diagnosis Health

Supporting employees following serious health diagnoses, treatment and return to work.



Family Building & Parenthood

Pregnancy, maternity, paternity, adoption, fertility and pregnancy after loss.



Trauma, Loss & Bereavement

Specialist emotional support following traumatic and life-changing events.



Leadership & Workplace Culture

Helping organisations build psychologically safe, compassionate workplaces.

Beyond EAP HR Knowledge Hub



A growing collection of:

- ✓ Practical HR Guides
- ✓ Specialist Insights
- ✓ Manager Workshops
- ✓ Workplace Resources

Explore our growing library of free HR Guides, specialist Insights and practical workplace resources.

Designed to help organisations confidently support employees through life's biggest transitions.

www.beyondeap.co.uk

**Because life doesn't stop outside the workplace.
Neither should support.**





Let's Start a Conversation

If you're facing a situation that feels complex, sensitive or unfamiliar, you don't need to navigate it alone. Let's have a conversation.

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Supporting employees through life's most significant transitions since 2014

