



Supporting Employees Following a Serious Health Diagnosis

Helping HR teams understand the journey beyond diagnosis.

? Signature Reflection

"A diagnosis may happen in a consultation room. The adjustment continues everywhere else. Understanding that journey is where compassionate workplaces make the greatest difference."



Welcome

A message from Sandie Dennis

Supporting employees through significant life events has always been at the heart of Beyond EAP. Over the years, one thing has become increasingly clear.

Receiving a serious health diagnosis is rarely just a medical event.

Whether someone is diagnosed with cancer, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, hearing loss, a neurological condition or another long-term illness, the diagnosis often marks the beginning of a much wider journey. One that affects confidence. Identity. Relationships. Future plans. And often, how someone experiences work.

HR professionals and managers frequently tell me they want to support employees well but worry about saying the wrong thing or not knowing enough about the condition itself.

The reassuring truth is this...

Employees rarely expect you to have medical expertise. What they remember is whether they felt understood. Whether someone listened. Whether work remained somewhere they felt valued, respected and supported.

This guide has been created to help organisations feel more confident supporting employees through one of life's most significant transitions.

Not by providing all the answers...

But by helping managers ask better questions, create psychologically safe workplaces and understand the person behind the diagnosis.

Because whilst every diagnosis is different... Every employee deserves to feel seen.

Warm wishes,

Sandie Dennis
Founder

BeyondEAP

Reflection

If one of your employees received a life-changing health diagnosis tomorrow, how confident would your managers feel supporting them?

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How to Use This Guide

A serious health diagnosis affects far more than physical health.

For many employees, it can influence confidence, identity, relationships, work, finances and how they see the future.

Every diagnosis is different. Every treatment pathway is different.
Every employee's experience is different.

This guide has been designed to help HR professionals; People teams and line managers confidently support employees through that adjustment.

Rather than offering rigid rules, it provides practical guidance, conversation starters and workplace considerations that can be adapted to everyone.

The most effective support begins by recognising that there is no "typical" experience following diagnosis.

You may find this guide useful:

- ✓ 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 strengthen workplace confidence around serious illness.

Throughout this guide you'll find:



Beyond EAP Insight

Professional observations drawn from supporting employees through significant health events.



Conversation Starter

Simple language managers can adapt when beginning sensitive conversations.



Practical Tip

Practical 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 to build confidence across your organisation.



Why This Guide Matters

Every day, employees across the UK receive life-changing health diagnoses whilst continuing to navigate their professional lives.

For some, the impact is immediate.

For others, it unfolds gradually over weeks, months or even years.

Many continue working throughout treatment or recovery.

Others may need time away before returning.

Some conditions are visible.

Many are not.

Yet one thing remains remarkably consistent.

Employees are often trying to process one of the biggest events of their lives whilst continuing to answer emails, attend meetings, support colleagues and maintain some sense of normality.

The workplace may see appointments.

Periods of absence.

Adjustments.

What colleagues don't always see is everything happening beneath the surface.

The uncertainty.

The loss of confidence.

The questions about identity.

The fear of being treated differently.

Understanding this reality is where compassionate workplaces make the greatest difference.

Employees don't expect managers to have all the answers.

They hope they'll have the confidence to begin the conversation.



Beyond EAP Insight

A serious health diagnosis changes far more than someone's health. It changes how they experience work, relationships and everyday life.



Reflection

When someone shares a serious diagnosis at work, do your managers immediately think about policies... or about the person sitting in front of them?

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At a Glance

Employees may be feeling...

- ✓ Shock
- ✓ Fear
- ✓ Relief
- ✓ Confused
- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Uncertain
- ✓ Determined

Managers often worry about...

- ✓ Saying the wrong thing.
- ✓ Asking questions that feel too personal.
- ✓ Respecting privacy.
- ✓ Balancing compassion with business needs.
- ✓ Treating someone differently.

Employees often need...

- ✓ Time.
- ✓ Honest conversations.
- ✓ Psychological safety.
- ✓ Flexibility.
- ✓ Regular check-ins.
- ✓ To feel seen as a person, not a diagnosis.

Every diagnosis is unique. The most meaningful support begins with understanding the person behind it





Understanding Life Beyond the Diagnosis

Every diagnosis is different

When an employee shares that they've received a serious health diagnosis, it's natural to want to understand what lies ahead.

The reality is that no two experiences are ever the same.

Some diagnoses happen suddenly.

Others follow months or even years of investigations.

Some conditions are temporary.

Others become lifelong companions.

Some treatments begin immediately.

Others involve monitoring, rehabilitation or adapting to a new way of living.

Even two people with the same diagnosis may experience completely different physical, emotional and practical challenges.

The most supportive organisations recognise this.

Rather than making assumptions, they remain curious, flexible and willing to adapt as an employee's needs change over time.

Supporting someone following a serious health diagnosis isn't about understanding every medical condition.

It's about understanding the individual.



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?



The Second Diagnosis

The diagnosis that happens at work

Receiving a diagnosis from a healthcare professional is only the beginning.

For many employees, another journey quietly begins almost immediately.

Questions they may never say out loud.

"Will people treat me differently?"

"Can I still do my job?"

"Should I tell my colleagues?"

"Will I still be seen as capable?"

"Will this affect my future?"

This is what we've come to think of as **The Second Diagnosis**.

It isn't medical.

It's personal.

It's professional.

It's emotional.

It's the moment someone begins adjusting not only to a health condition, but to how they believe life and work may change because of it.

For many employees, this second diagnosis can feel just as significant as the first.

Understanding that journey allows managers to move beyond simply responding to illness and begin supporting the person living with it.



Beyond EAP Insight

Medical treatment begins with a diagnosis. Workplace support begins with understanding the person living with it.

Reflection

What assumptions might employees be making about how work will change before they've even shared their diagnosis?



The Beyond EAP Perspective

One of the biggest misconceptions about serious health diagnoses is that support begins once practical adjustments have been made.

Our experience tells us something different.

Support begins much earlier.

It begins when employees believe they'll be safe enough to have honest conversations.

It grows through regular check-ins.

Through managers who remain curious rather than making assumptions.

Through small moments that quietly communicate:
"We're here to support you."

Sometimes those ordinary conversations become the moments employees remember long after appointments have finished and life begins finding a new rhythm.

Support isn't built through policies alone.

It's built through relationships.

Through trust. Through consistency. Through everyday conversations.



Beyond EAP Insight

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



Practical Tip

Don't wait until someone appears to be struggling.
A simple conversation early on can create the trust that allows employees to ask for help later.



Reflection

Would your employees feel safe enough to tell you when they're struggling—not just physically, but emotionally too?



Visible & Hidden Impacts

A serious health diagnosis affects much more than physical health.

Employees may be adjusting to a wide range of practical and emotional changes, many of which remain completely invisible to those around them.

These may include:

- Anxiety about the future.
- Fatigue or reduced energy.
- Changes in confidence.
- Worries about work or career progression.
- Financial concerns.
- Feeling like a burden to colleagues.
- Changes in identity.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Grieving the life they expected.

Some employees will openly share these experiences.

Others may continue working whilst quietly carrying them alone.

Understanding these hidden challenges helps managers respond with greater empathy and flexibility.



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 support you."



Reflection

Could someone in your organisation be working twice as hard simply to appear as though everything is okay?



Supporting Employees Through Adjustment

A serious health diagnosis isn't a single event.

It's the beginning of an adjustment.

Employees often describe navigating a series of changes over time.

There may be moments of optimism.

Periods of frustration.

Days when work feels like a welcome distraction.

Others where even familiar tasks require enormous effort.

Support shouldn't end once the diagnosis has been shared.

Nor should it focus only on periods of absence.

The most effective organisations recognise that adjustment is ongoing and that an employee's needs may change throughout their journey.

Creating opportunities for regular conversations allows support to evolve naturally.

Practical Ways to Offer Support

Consider:

- Agreeing regular check-ins.
- Reviewing workload together.
- Offering flexibility where appropriate.
- Respecting confidentiality.
- Recognising that needs may change over time.
- Focusing on the individual rather than the diagnosis.



Beyond EAP Insight

Support isn't about checking progress. It's about checking in.



Practical Tip

Instead of asking,

"Are you okay?"

Try asking,

"How has work been feeling for you recently?"

It opens the conversation without creating pressure to say everything is fine.



Reflection

Does your organisation review support regularly, or only when circumstances change?



Starting the Conversation

"What if I say the wrong thing?"

This is one of the questions I hear most often from managers.

The reassuring truth is that employees rarely expect perfect words. What they remember is how the conversation made them feel.

Did they feel listened to?

Did they feel respected?

Did they feel believed?

Did they feel able to be honest?

The purpose of the conversation isn't to understand every detail of someone's medical condition.

It's to understand how work can best support them.

Every employee will have different needs, preferences and concerns.

The most important thing you can do is create a conversation where they feel safe enough to share them.

Conversation Starters

You might say:

"Thank you for trusting me with this."

"Everyone's experience is different. I'd really like to understand how we can best support you."

"Would it help to talk about what work feels like over the next few weeks?"

"Would you like us to agree what, if anything, we share with colleagues?"

Sometimes the most supportive thing you can do is simply allow someone time to think.

Silence isn't awkward.

It's often a sign that someone feels safe enough to reflect.

Beyond EAP Insight

Employees don't expect managers to understand every diagnosis.

They hope they'll take the time to understand them.

Reflection

If one of your managers had this conversation tomorrow, how confident would they feel?



Well-Meaning... But Unhelpful

Most comments that cause upset are said with kindness.

Managers naturally want to reassure employees.

To make things feel better.

To offer hope.

But some well-intentioned phrases can unintentionally minimise what someone is experiencing.

Well-Meaning... But Unhelpful

- ✗ "At least they found it early."
- ✗ "You'll be back to normal soon."
- ✗ "You look really well."
- ✗ "Everything happens for a reason."
- ✗ "My friend had that and they're absolutely fine."
- ✗ "Just let us know if you need anything."
- ✗ "Try not to worry."

More Supportive Alternatives

- ✓ "Thank you for telling me."
- ✓ "I'm really glad you've shared this with me."
- ✓ "What would feel most helpful from us right now?"
- ✓ "Let's keep talking as things develop."
- ✓ "How has work been feeling for you?"
- ✓ "There's no pressure to have all the answers today."

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

That honesty often builds 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.

✓ Practical Tip

Avoid making assumptions based on appearance.

Some employees may look physically well whilst quietly navigating fatigue, pain, anxiety or uncertainty.

❓ Reflection

Avoid making assumptions based on appearance.

Some employees may look physically well whilst quietly navigating fatigue, pain, anxiety or uncertainty.



Building Psychological Safety

Creating a workplace where employees don't have to pretend

Following a serious health diagnosis, many employees describe feeling pressure to appear "back to normal."

To smile. To reassure colleagues. To avoid becoming "the person who's ill." That pressure can become exhausting.

Psychological safety means creating a workplace where employees don't feel they have to hide what they're experiencing.

It means knowing they can say:

"I'm struggling today."

"I'm feeling overwhelmed."

"I'm worried about my next appointment."

"I'm finding work harder than I expected."

...without fearing judgement or damaging their career.

Psychological safety isn't created through one conversation.

It's built through consistent, compassionate leadership.

Every check-in.

Every honest conversation.

Every moment an employee feels listened to.

When employees feel psychologically safe, they're more likely to ask for support before they reach crisis point.

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

Some employees won't ask for help immediately.

Creating a supportive environment today may be what enables someone to reach out weeks or even months later.

Reflection

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



Beyond EAP Action Checklist

Before the Conversation

- ☐ Arrange somewhere private.
- ☐ Allow enough time.
- ☐ Avoid interruptions.
- ☐ Don't make assumptions.
- ☐ Remember every diagnosis is different.

During the Conversation

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

Throughout the Employee's Journey

- ☐ Check in regularly.
- ☐ Review workload together.
- ☐ Be prepared for changing needs.
- ☐ Offer flexibility where possible.
- ☐ Continue conversations after returning to work.
- ☐ Recognise that adjustment takes time.

Supporting Managers

- ☐ Encourage managers to ask questions.
- ☐ Remind them they aren't expected to have all the answers.
- ☐ Provide opportunities to seek HR advice.
- ☐ Build confidence through regular learning.



Beyond EAP Insight

Support isn't measured by having the perfect response. It's measured by helping someone feel less alone.



Team Discussion

If every manager in your organisation followed this checklist, what difference would it make to someone receiving a serious health diagnosis?



One Question to Take Back to Your Team

What assumptions might we unknowingly make about employees following a serious health diagnosis?

Every diagnosis is different.

Every employee is different.

Yet it's human nature to make assumptions.

That someone will want time away from work.

That they'll want to talk about their diagnosis.

That they'll recover quickly.

That returning to work means everything is back to normal.

The most supportive organisations remain curious instead.

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

How do we make sure we're responding to the individual, rather than making assumptions about the diagnosis?

Sometimes the biggest improvement in workplace support begins with a change in perspective.



Team Discussion

What could your organisation do differently to ensure employees feel understood as individuals rather than defined by their diagnosis?



When Specialist Support Can Help

Supporting an employee following a serious health diagnosis isn't about expecting managers to become medical experts, counsellors or therapists.

It's about recognising when someone may benefit from additional specialist support.

For some employees, compassionate conversations with their manager and practical workplace adjustments will be enough.

For others, adjusting to a life-changing diagnosis, changes in confidence, identity, relationships or returning to work may require more specialist support.

Recognising this early can make a significant difference to an employee's wellbeing and experience at work.

Specialist support isn't about replacing the role of HR or managers. It's about strengthening the support already being offered.

Beyond EAP provides confidential specialist support including:

- ✓ Adjusting to a serious health diagnosis.
- ✓ Cancer and long-term health conditions.
- ✓ Hearing loss and invisible disabilities.
- ✓ Chronic illness.
- ✓ Emotional adjustment and resilience.
- ✓ Returning to work.
- ✓ Confidence and identity following diagnosis.
- ✓ Supporting managers through complex conversations.

Support is always tailored to the individual because no two diagnoses—and no two people—experience the same journey.

Our role isn't to replace the valuable support already offered by HR and managers.

It's to work alongside organisations, providing specialist expertise when employees need it most.



Beyond EAP Insight

The most compassionate organisations recognise that specialist support strengthens workplace support—it doesn't replace it.

? Reflection

If one of your employees needed additional emotional support tomorrow, would your managers know where to turn?

Continue Your Learning

Supporting employees through life-changing health events doesn't begin and end with one guide.

The Beyond EAP HR Knowledge Hub is a growing collection of practical HR Guides, specialist Insights and manager resources designed to help organisations confidently support employees through life's most significant transitions.

You may also find these HR Guides helpful

- Real HR Challenges
- Supporting Employees Through Pregnancy After Loss
- Supporting Employees Following a Cancer Diagnosis
- (Coming Soon) Supporting Employees Through Bereavement

Related Insights

- Supporting Employees When Life Gets Complex
- Why Post-Diagnosis Support Matters More Than Ever
- The Hidden Impact of Hearing Loss at Work

Manager Workshop

Managing Maternity Leave: From Announcement to Return-to-Work
Helping managers confidently support employees throughout pregnancy, parental leave and successful return-to-work conversations.

[View Line Manager Training](#)

Explore the Beyond EAP HR Knowledge Hub

You'll find:

- ✓ Practical HR Guides
- ✓ Specialist Insights
- ✓ Manager Workshops
- ✓ Resources to build manager confidence

Helping organisations confidently support employees through life's most significant transitions.

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

Team Discussion

Which resource would help your managers feel more confident supporting employees following a serious health diagnosis?



Key Takeaways

- Every diagnosis is unique.
- The Second Diagnosis happens at work.
- Support begins with understanding the person—not the condition.
- Managers are expected to support—not solve.
- Regular check-ins matter more than perfect words.
- Psychological safety encourages people to ask for help earlier.

Why Organisations Choose Beyond EAP

Beyond EAP provides specialist employee support when life becomes more complex.

Working alongside HR teams, we help organisations confidently support employees through:

Family Building & Parenthood

Supporting employees through fertility treatment, pregnancy, pregnancy after loss, parental leave, adoption, neurodiverse parenting and the transition back to work.

Trauma, Loss & Bereavement

Compassionate support following bereavement, traumatic events, critical incidents, baby loss and complex grief.

Post-Diagnosis Health

Supporting employees following cancer diagnoses, chronic illness, disability, hearing loss and other life-changing health conditions.

Workplace Culture & Leadership

Helping organisations build psychologically safe workplaces through specialist coaching, manager workshops, HR guidance and practical workplace resources.

Beyond EAP HR Knowledge Hub

A growing library of:

- Practical HR Guides
- Specialist Insights
- Manager Workshops

Helping organisations confidently support employees through life's most significant 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

