

4 Thinking Traps Around Cancer At Work



In the work I do supporting those dealing with cancer in the workplace, how people communicate with those affected is a challenge that raises its head time and again.

Of course as a line manager there are formal discussions that need to take place, but amongst and around that, it is often those more informal, 'on the hoof' conversations that cause the most challenges for people.

Colleagues sometimes struggle so much to say the right thing they choose to say nothing at all, only adding to potential isolation and anxiety. Others unwittingly come across as flippant or uncaring while trying to say and do the right thing.

It can feel like you're walking on eggshells.

Like anything, actually spending some time reflecting on the impact you might have and what you might say, can be a useful exercise and avoid unnecessary heartache on both sides of the conversation - especially if you have someone returning to work after time away.

Aim to keep communication open and flexible rather than making judgements about what they might or might not want, now or in the future. And make sure you talk on an ongoing basis.

In the end the mindset you have about the person with or after cancer, will impact on how you communicate with them and here are some of the classic thinking traps that you might like to try and avoid

Thinking Trap 1 - Being overly positive

Often when people have concerns around cancer, others will try and be upbeat and positive about the situation. While nobody wants to be surrounded by doom and gloom, well intentioned comments such as 'I'm sure things will work out, 'fingers crossed' and ' try to take your mind off it' can sometimes land as being dismissive and showing a lack of empathy.

People often believe that when someone has come through cancer and perhaps been given the 'all clear' they should be feeling very positive about where they are. But psychologically it is often not that easy to move on and the fear of the cancer returning can be overwhelming.

Sometimes rather than trying to move a persons thinking forward - to make a difficult situation easier for *us* to deal with - we just have to listen, live with the discomfort and be there for them.

Thinking Trap 2 - The person after cancer is the same person as before

Hearing the words 'you have cancer' changes somebody's life forever. Remember that following cancer, sufferers are classed as living with a disability even if they end up cancer free.

Sometimes people can to all intents and purposes 'look' really well on the outside, but they are likely to be facing a series of physical and psychological side effects.

Try not to judge them as who they were before cancer - or how they 'appear' to be after. Comments such as 'you look really well' 'you used to be great at this' or wanting them to talk too soon about objectives or career progression, may put them under undue pressure to 'be' well and again leave them feeling overwhelmed.

They probably feel they are doing well just being there each day, so slow down and give them time.

Thinking Trap 3 - Work is less important to them now

The other extreme of not pressuring them about career progression, is to believe they don't want to be at work at all!

Try not to judge them on how you think you might feel if in the same situation. Research shows just how important the normality of work can be for cancer recovery and the people I work with are totally committed to doing the best they can at work - they just might not be able to do quite as much as you or even they believe.

Make sure you appreciate they will need adjustments to their working conditions for a considerable amount of time, if not permanently and be ready to be flexible about those adjustments ongoing. Often people try and do too much on returning to work and you may find they need more changes in the weeks or months ahead.

Thinking Trap 4 - They're playing the cancer card

Most people are sympathetic to a cancer diagnosis in the early days and when people are going through treatment, but often following cancer we see a growing 'compassion fatigue' around what is expected.

Most sufferers as a minimum are dealing with an overwhelming fatigue and many people I know who work part time following their cancer, spend the rest of their week recovering from their time at work. Cancer is classed as a disability for life, because it can have debilitating ongoing side effects; so don't assume that 'all clear' means all OK.

People need to work to aid their recovery, they want to contribute, but their capabilities are likely to be reduced for a considerable period of time. Cancer recovery is unlike an other illness and is more likely to take 12 months than 12 weeks. Be aware that people have ongoing challenges to contend with and need your support not your frustration.

Overall keep your communications open and frequent. Focus on asking open questions such as 'how are you?' or 'what can I do to help?' and really listening to the response. Don't imagine that you know how people feel or what they must be thinking. Understand that recovery takes time and they are doing the best they can.

Listen twice as much as you speak, support twice as much as you criticise. Maintain your compassion, think about the impact of your words, but most of all just be there - *after all, your presence in the most important gift you can give.*

Debbie Palmer is an executive coach and facilitator at Working with Cancer who help organisations, line managers and colleagues support those affected by cancer in the workplace.

Debbie Palmer is an Associate Coach of [Working with Cancer](#).