

Supporting an Employee Who Has a Chronic Illness

A chronic illness is a medical problem that lasts a year or longer, limits what a person can do and requires ongoing care. About 40 percent of the U.S. workforce has at least one chronic health condition. Twenty percent have two or more.

Diseases such as heart disease, cancer, arthritis and diabetes are the leading causes of disability in the United States. These diseases account for seven of every 10 deaths. They affect the quality of life of 90 million Americans.

Balancing job performance requirements with compassion and maintaining workplace morale presents a formidable challenge for everyone involved.

Issues at the workplace

Legally, employers cannot discriminate against people with disabilities, which in many cases includes chronic illnesses. The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) also requires employers to make "reasonable accommodation" for persons with a disability. More often than not, the issue of chronic illness does not reach the threshold outlined by the ADA.

Symptoms of chronic conditions that affect productivity include:

- fatigue and limited physical endurance due to illness or the presence of pain
- fluctuating capacity to perform job duties due to exacerbations and remissions of the illness
- difficulty with focus and concentration due to stress, medication side effects or pain
- decreased mobility due to stiffness, fatigue, pain or weakness
- sporadic productivity throughout the day—such as in the morning while waiting for medication to take effect, or late in the day due to fatigue or pain
- frequent absence from work due to all of the above

How to respond

Studies show that managing a chronic medical problem at work goes most smoothly when issues are honestly discussed with those involved. Supervisors with questions regarding accommodations for an “ill” employee should meet with human resources personnel to acquaint themselves with company policies. The supervisor should also meet with the “ill” employee to:

- gain an understanding of the specific workplace issues and challenges he faces
- develop a strategy to help the employee perform his duties
- inform the person of the company’s employee assistance program (EAP) and provide specific contact information

When accommodations, such as a change of schedule or job duties are made, it is the supervisor’s responsibility to communicate with those directly involved.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

It is not uncommon for co-workers to feel uneasy or stressed about working with someone with a chronic illness. Employees can and often do become resentful if they perceive that consideration given to a chronically ill employee is creating additional work or stress for them. Co-workers with such concerns should discuss them in private with their supervisor.

Supervisors should never minimize the impact, stress or inconvenience caused by chronic illness. After acknowledging concerns, the supervisor should encourage suggestions from employees on how to:

- best manage the challenges associated with the specific job function
- personally support the chronically ill employee

Open, honest dialogue is always the best way to keep resentments from affecting morale and performance.

In most instances individuals are eager to pitch in and help a co-worker in need. Engaging support from co-workers can actually increase morale. Management should recognize and, when possible, reward employees who go the extra mile to help a fellow employee.

Sources:

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By Drew Edwards, EdD, MS
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