

Living Caring Working

IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE FOR PEOPLE WITH A LIFE THREATENING ILLNESS,
THEIR FAMILIES, CARERS AND COMMUNITIES

RESOURCE 4 | Understanding your work colleague who is living with a life threatening illness

Working with someone who is living with a serious illness which may shorten their life can be a very confronting experience. You may not know what to say or how to interact with your colleague.

Here is some information to help you understand what your work colleague might be experiencing.

Being able to work with a life threatening illness can be important because it allows a person to:

- maintain an important part of their identity
- keep a sense of order and control in an uncertain environment
- earn income to pay for treatment
- provide for their family
- engage in social interaction to prevent isolation.

People with a life threatening illness may suffer from the following:

- loss of physical strength and/or coordination
- fatigue
- loss of concentration
- forgetfulness
- grief reactions—depression, shock, anger, sadness.

Here are some ways you can help your work colleagues.

Offer your support

- Support can be offered in a tangible way, such as offering to get lunch for your colleague. Support can also be shown by just listening to your colleague. You might like to ask your colleague how you can best help them.

Show your respect

- Show that you care and are interested without prying for details.
- Accept the treatment and life choices they make without trying to influence them or provide advice unless it is specifically sought.

Follow their lead

- Your colleague will sometimes need to talk about his or her experience, and other times will choose not to. Remember that keeping a sense of normality is important—whatever you talked about before is likely to be appropriate now.

Ask how you can help

- When in doubt, ask your colleague how you can best offer your help and understanding.
- Offer suggestions for how you can help.