

Information Resource Sheet No.10

TOUGH QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS OF AN EMPLOYED CARER OF A PERSON WITH A LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS

Care and support

1. ***N is caring for a terminally ill husband. What sort of support does she need from me?***

She needs to know from you that when her husband's needs take priority over her work, that her job is safe. Everyone's needs are different, and will change over the course her husband's illness takes. But if the question of N's job security is addressed, she will be more open to trusting you with other needs as they emerge.

2. ***N comes to work for time-out from being her ill partner's carer. How do I make sure she enjoys her work?***

Work may be at the heart of many people's identity and sense of worth. A life-threatening illness can strip that away from both the ill person and their carers. N will enjoy her work if she is not treated as if she is ill. Keep her work routines as normal as possible, while ensuring she knows you are willing to discuss with her changes in her work if she deems the need has arisen.

3. ***Some of my staff say N doesn't seem to be coping with her husband's illness. Whose needs should I respond to? And how?***

Don't assume N is not coping with her husband's illness. People often project their own feelings of helplessness on to the one who is suffering. Pay attention to how these staff are feeling – whether they sound anxious, uncertain, angry, or fearful. Any of these uncomfortable feelings may cause staff to withdraw from N, or alternatively, start 'fixing' things for her. Both these responses tend to undermine N's coping. So talk with N about your wish to support staff around her to support her throughout her husband's illness. Some suggestions to consider include appointing a work colleague to support N, ensure accurate information is passed on to staff about N's husband, and any known needs, involving a counsellor to provide training or for individual staff counselling.

4. ***N is the carer for his ill wife, and is the main bread-winner working here on a short-term contract. Is it OK for me to try to improve his job security?***

You may not be doing N a favour if your process in offering N more secure work puts his work colleagues off-side, and creates antagonism towards him. Work through established Human Resource policies for your work organisation.

5. ***I'm not sure what Head Office thinks about Ns illness. I am worried they will make it hard for him to keep working. I feel caught in the middle. Don't we owe him something?***

When people are not sure about a situation, there is a tendency to do nothing. Silence in situations of confusion can breed gossip, as people try to guess what is going on. Inform N of your need to clarify Head Office's thinking about your management of N's work and your work area during N's illness. Then you can inform N and other staff you manage about the range of options you have to support N and them during this time.

Grief and loss

6. ***Since his brother's death, N has been unable to pick up his old work responsibilities. This has caused some frustration with several of his work-mates, as they have a deadline to meet. Should I withdraw him from that work area until the job is done?***

Feeling powerless is a normal feeling associated with grief. It is important not to make decisions on Ns behalf, even when you believe it is in his best interest, as this reinforces his feelings of powerlessness with an experience of being made powerless. Talk with N about your concerns with meeting the deadline, and find out what he suggests. If necessary, then talk to the work group about how you wish to proceed. It may also be helpful to engage a grief consultant/counsellor to talk with your employees about your company's policy to support staff in times of grief.