



PEOPLE



How to support an employee with a chronic illness, both in the office and when they're on leave

KAREN GATELY / Wednesday, September 18, 2019



As a leader of people, if you haven't yet had to manage the frequent absence and need for additional support of someone battling chronic illness, then you've been lucky. The harsh reality is chronic illness is extraordinarily common. Defined as a human health condition or disease that is persistent or otherwise long-lasting in its effects, chronic illnesses include diabetes, asthma, heart disease, arthritis, kidney disease, HIV/AIDS, depression, lupus, osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis, to name a few.

According to the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS), of approximately 10.5 million Australians aged 25-64 years in 2004-05, about [33%](#) reported at least one chronic disease. The 2017-2018 ABS *National Health Survey* found the number of people battling chronic illness is growing, with "just under half (47.3%) of Australians having one or more chronic conditions, an increase from 2007-08 when two-fifths (42.2%) of people had one or more chronic conditions".

The first step toward meeting your moral and legal obligations as an employer of people with chronic illnesses is to get educated. Understand the law, but also understand the illness your team member is battling and its impact on their health and happiness. It's common for employers and colleagues to simply not know what to say or do when someone on the team is diagnosed with a chronic condition. While that's understandable, move past hesitation by finding out what you need to know.

Start by understanding that disability discrimination law prohibits employers from treating someone less favourably because they have a disability, with one major exception, if they can no longer perform the inherent requirements of the role. For example, a make-up artist who has become blind or scaffolder who has developed epilepsy may be unable to meet the demands of the job, no matter how far the employer is willing to go to make changes to the role or facilities provided.

Employers are obligated under law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the ways in which the role is performed in order to accommodate the employee's diagnosis and symptoms. Like all areas of law that refer to 'reasonableness', it is open to debate as to how accommodating you need to be, depending on the circumstances. In most circumstances, however, it will be seen as a reasonable adjustment to employment conditions to allow the time and flexibility needed to attend medical appointments or manage symptoms.

Typically, an employee battling chronic illness is able to take up to three months off over a 12-month period, consecutively or in broken periods, before it would be considered reasonable for an employer to seek to terminate their employment, due to their ill-health. Throughout that period, the employee is entitled to access paid or unpaid sick leave, depending on their accrued leave entitlements.

While there may be little you can do to influence how often or for how long an employee needs time off, there is a lot you can do to help them to be engaged and contributing at their best when they are able. Among the most important steps you can take include engagement, connection and creativity.

1. Engage in open conversations

Have the courage to have open, honest and compassionate conversations with people who are taking a lot of time out due to poor health.

Be careful not to unnecessarily pry but enquire as to why they are struggling to regularly attend work. Only ask questions relevant to the individual's ability to meet the demands of their job. Of course, also explore ways in which your organisation may be able to support the individual, but respect also their right to privacy.

Employees are only obligated to disclose their diagnosis if their symptoms create potential safety risks for themselves or others.

2. Maintain connection

Feeling connected and part of a community is essential to anyone's ability to cope with chronic illness and heal. Check in regularly when people are away for extended periods of time. Thoughtfulness can go a long way to ensuring the individual maintains a strong desire to get well and back to work.

3. Be creative

Work with the individual to identify solutions to the obstacles they face in being able to deliver in their role. Technology can be an especially powerful enabler when people need a little extra help.

Take, for example, the writer who chose to master voice-to-text technology when forced off their computer for weeks at a time. While the output was far from perfect and in need of heavy editing by her colleagues, the approach adopted meant the organisation continued to benefit from her experience and expertise. She benefited by feeling productive and valued.



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