



**BC Cancer Agency**

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## **Disclosing Your Cancer Experience at Work**

By Maureen Parkinson Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, BC Cancer Agency Vancouver  
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Your decision to disclose your breast cancer history to co-workers depends solely on you. You have no legal obligation to tell anyone about your cancer unless it interferes with your ability to work. What you disclose will depend on your work environment, your culture, your relationship with others, and your fundamental feelings about the situation. While in most cases disclosure will improve your work situation, in some cases it can make things worse. Only you can decide whether it is the right thing to do.

However, there are some compelling reasons to bring co-workers into your confidence. They may wonder about your changes in mood and behaviour and the extra time off you have been taking and fill in the gaps with rumours. As well, not disclosing to others may lead you to put up a false front, and maintain a degree of self composure that only masks very stressful times. By holding back, you may be depriving yourself of useful support that only your co-workers can give you.

Probably the best place to start is by informing your employer. If you need to take time off work, or your work performance is affected, your employer can co-operate to make life easier during treatment, recovery and return to work. Your employer doesn't need to know the specific details of your cancer, but only how it might impact your ability to do your job. By law, an employer must "reasonably accommodate" an employee who is experiencing health challenges, but the employee in turn needs to disclose what those challenges are. Your employer can also help explain the accommodations that you need to co-workers, and ensure that they respond appropriately, but should not disclose personal information without your consent.

An employer may not terminate your employment, or otherwise unilaterally change the terms of your employment (i.e. reduce your salary or benefits or demote you) on the basis of a mental or physical disability. Such actions on the part of your employer would amount to discriminatory conduct under the B.C. Human Rights Code, and you would be entitled to lodge a complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal. You could also seek remedies in court, if you felt that you were wrongfully or constructively dismissed from your employment. If you live in other provinces, you might want to check the legislation to clarify your rights and what actions you can take.

If you are concerned about talking directly to your employer, it can be helpful to enlist the services of someone from your company's Human Resources/ Personnel department. She/he will likely be quite knowledgeable about the employer's responsibilities and may be in the position to coach the employer accordingly. If your company does not have a human resources department, and you are concerned about discrimination on the basis of mental or physical disability, you may want to consult with your union representative (if you have one at your workplace), B.C. Human Rights Coalition (1.877.689.8474, 604.689.8474) or even a lawyer. They can help you to at least understand your rights and how to protect yourself.

The exact method for disclosing to others is a very personal decision. You may prefer to speak face to face, or by telephone, or by having a third person act on your behalf. However if you

proceed, it's important to review what it is you would like to communicate. Once you've spoken to your employer, you can also ask him or her to disclose on your behalf and to set the tone on how you would like to be treated. Your employer may be interested in setting up an educational session for employees with specialists to answer questions related to cancer to address any misconceptions or prejudices co-workers might have. Alternatively, you might ask a trusted co-worker to be your spokesperson and your advocate at the workplace. Don't feel obligated to talk to co-workers you don't have a good relationship with or who you don't feel are likely to be supportive.

Sometimes co-workers will feel uncomfortable with your situation or won't know how to act. Guidance from you up front will help them feel more at ease. It's important to plan what you want to say about your cancer when you return to work. As well, it's important to remember that every person's experience with breast cancer is unique and the uniqueness of your experience may be difficult to explain to your co-workers. This can be a source of disappointment, but it's best not to take this lack of understanding personally - difficult as that can sometimes be.

If you are hoping to return to work after recovering from treatment, it's a great help to stay connected with your workplace by telephone calls, lunch dates and by attending work-related social gatherings. Such contacts keep you in the minds of your co-workers and strengthen the expectation that you'll be returning to work. Maintaining contact will also help reduce any anxiety you might be feeling about returning to work.

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Contribution from Robert J. Lesperance of Lesperance & Mendes, Lawyers, Vancouver & Michael Miller, Editor, *Learning Curve Magazine*, Vancouver.

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