

Carers Toolkit: information for work colleagues

Colleagues are often the first people to become aware that a fellow employee has caring responsibilities, or that these responsibilities are impacting negatively on them. They are likely to be the first to recognise if a team member appears distressed or is behaving differently. In addition, team members may be more comfortable discussing their care situation with their colleagues rather than their managers or team leaders.



Support in the workplace

When you are working with team members who have caring responsibilities, it can be unclear what to do or how to best support them in these situations.

There are supports available to individuals with caring responsibilities in the Tasmanian State Service (TSS), from leave and flexible working arrangements, to other supports such as workplace adjustments. There are also external support options available from organisations outside the TSS to address the various complexities of caring.

While your managers and team leaders are responsible for understanding, recommending and approving support for employees who have caring responsibilities, colleagues are well positioned to support a team member on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, you should also be aware of the TSS and external support options available. Information on the range of TSS and external support available to carers is detailed in the main resource kit.

WHAT OTHER SUPPORT CAN COLLEAGUES PROVIDE?

You can support team members who are also carers by:

- starting a conversation with the team member about how they are feeling. There is no need to try to solve their problems – just listen to their concerns and offer assistance if you can. It can make a big difference to carers just knowing that their colleagues are supportive and open to discussing their care situation;
- making them aware of the support options that might be available to them (detailed in the main resource kit);
- suggesting they speak with their manager or team leader about their caring responsibilities, especially if they are concerned it is impacting on their performance;
- offering to support them in accessing support options, either through a conversation with their manager or by contacting human resources;
- actively including them in social occasions, and encouraging them to participate in health and wellbeing activities, especially those offered in the workplace; and
- offering assistance with work tasks (if practical).¹



¹ <https://www.headsup.org.au/supporting-others/helping-a-workmate>

“I care for my oldest son. He is 29 and has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression and anxiety. It’s been a difficult road. As a parent, all you want for your children is to live happy and fulfilled life, but for Matthew life is difficult and present daily challenges. A smile is rare and a laugh almost never happens. My heart breaks for him.

I am lucky in some respects. I work full time. This make caring difficult although it means I can support him materially. I worry about how I will be able to do this once I retire. My workplace is supportive. When I need to chase things up or get him to doctors I am given time without question. In return, I often work late or start early and will take work home. This is my choice. It has to be a give and take arrangement. Carers leave is available and I use this when I need to.

My biggest frustration is that when he needs it the most, my son either refuses or avoids help. He will not let me in and he will not see doctors. For some reason the system won’t make allowances for this despite the diagnosis and in the face of what we know about mental illness. They want the mentally ill to help themselves before they will assist. Otherwise, they will only step in when the situation becomes extreme. I often feel very alone and unsupported. Working full time makes it more difficult to access support. It’s nobody’s fault, it’s just the reality I inhabit. My hope is that he will accept help and get well enough to find some joy in life. That would be the greatest gift a father could receive.”

- State Service employee

Q&A FOR WORK COLLEAGUES

This sub-section provides advice to colleagues on situations that may arise when it comes to supporting team members with caring responsibilities.

A team member needs to leave the workplace during work hours because of an urgent situation relating to their care responsibilities

Many people care for family members whose needs may change without warning. Team members in these care situations may need to leave the office quickly during work hours or require time off at short notice to attend to urgent situations.

- Make sure the team member is okay to leave work to attend to the situation, for example, if the employee is overly distressed it may not be safe for them to drive.
- If the employee is not able to speak to their manager or team leader about the urgent situation and the need to leave the workplace, let them know you will advise the manager or team leader for them as soon as possible.

- It may be appropriate to check in with the team member at a later time. Speak with your manager or team leader first.
- Supporting a colleague may also cause you personal distress. Make sure you seek the support you need, while still ensuring you respect the confidentiality of your colleague if necessary.

Work colleagues may be concerned about the impact on them of a team member's working arrangements or other support provided

Colleagues may be concerned that their workload will be/has increased because of the arrangements provided to carers.

- It is important to keep in mind that managers and team leaders, when making decisions about alternative working arrangements, take into consideration the impact the arrangements will have on the rest of their team.
- If you are still concerned about the impact of these types of arrangements, speak to your manager or team leader directly

A team member's caring responsibilities have ceased but they still seem to be affected

It is important to be aware that caring can have impacts on the carer even after their responsibilities have ceased. They may be grieving or coming to terms with changes to their care situation. Carers may also have many post-care responsibilities such as managing the former care recipient's belongings and property.

- A team member's work life and wellbeing can continue to be affected in the post-care period and, as a colleague, you should continue to provide what support you can.



- Keep in mind that workplace adjustments may continue for an agreed period after active caring has ceased.
- It is important not to pressure a work colleague or make assumptions about their needs. Instead, ask them how you can help and what you can do to make them feel comfortable and supported.

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