

Dealing with Death & Grief in the Workplace

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These days, most people spend more of their waking hours at the workplace than at home. People who work together may become close like an extended family. Therefore when a colleague dies or one is grieving a death or a loss, the impact on his/her co-workers can be tremendous and can influence the workplace in a variety of ways.

Productivity can be compromised and the dynamics of the workplace can change. When the death is unexpected, in a violent act or an accident, the grief response can be quite traumatic for the survivors, further impacting work.

Grief and loss occurs both at work and home, but these two realms can be difficult to separate. Serious illness and death in the family commonly affect a person's workplace performance. Typically, the grief response results from a personal crisis-divorce, fire, work-related or auto accident; sudden death-heart attack, stroke, suicide, accident, homicide; chronic or terminal health problems, or job termination-layoff, or dismissal.

Each person's experience of loss and each grief response is unique. However there are some common feelings and symptoms often experienced by the grieving. These include: sadness, betrayal, anxiety, fear, mistrust, irritability, guilt, anger, tension, depression, and loss of confidence. Grieving people often develop physical symptoms such as abdominal pain, headaches, insomnia, fatigue, changes in appetite, increased drug or alcohol use, restlessness, absentmindedness, and poor concentration. These emotions and symptoms of grief response can significantly impact a person's ability to function.

Thus, grief can upset workers and hamper the work environment. Unfortunately, most businesses cannot afford to halt production, sales or services to accommodate the grief response. Instead they continue on in the mode of "business as usual."

When an employee experiences a loss or an illness their ability to deal with the grieving process can become even more prolonged if the person does not feel aided by his/her manager, supervisor or employer. Those who feel cared for and supported are more likely to have improved recovery.

Guidelines for Dealing with Co-workers & Grief –

Acknowledge the coworker's grief. Let them know you recognize the magnitude of their loss. However, rather than worrying about finding the best words to use, it is much more important to connect with the grieving person. A sincere expression of sympathy, "I'm sorry for your loss," will let them know you care.

Many people are uncomfortable with displaying their emotions publicly and furthermore, may feel uncomfortable responding to other's public emotions, especially feelings of grief.

Those who find tears or expressions of strong emotions unsettling instinctively avoid a grieving coworker; this avoidance makes the coworker feel even more isolated in their loss. One way of handling the coworker whom recently experienced a loss is to write a note or send flowers expressing sympathy rather than sharing the sympathy face-to-face in a conversation at the office.

It is also important to listen to the grieving coworker. Listening requires a little more emotional energy, but it can be very valuable to the bereaved. Each time the person has a chance to tell the story, the loss becomes more real. In addition he/she gains a bit more perspective, which ultimately helps to lessen the stress of the loss.

When Co-workers Experience a Personal Loss –

- Acknowledge the co-worker's grief.
- Let the co-worker know you empathize with the impact of their loss.
- Expect tears and sadness.
- Express sympathy openly and from the heart—whether in person or in writing.
- Expect to listen to the story of the grieving colleague again and again.
- Respect the grieving person's desire for privacy. Honor closed doors and silence in conversation.
- Offer specific and appropriate assistance—cooking a meal, caring for children or pets, helping with shopping or other errands.
- Remember to include the co-worker in social plans. Let them decide whether to accept or decline the invitation.
- Accept less than their best performance from the co-worker for a while, but expect a return to the best over time.

Helping the Bereaved Worker –

- Immediately acknowledge the death with a note or flowers sent from management and workers can demonstrate support for the grieving person.
- A workplace representative at the funeral can also convey the company's condolence.
- Asking how the bereaved worker is doing and then listening to their response can be helpful.
- Providing some flexibility in work hours even time off can help the worker cope with the combined stressors of work and grief.
- Being patient and understanding that the grieving process takes time and that the worker will not quickly "snap out of it" will also help.

Supporting the Workplace –

- Let the person grieve in his or her own way. If the person finds working to be therapeutic, do not lighten the workload. If the grieving person is slow to move back into work, try to ease his/her workload.

- Accept that the grieving person's moods may be changeable for some time. It helps to be aware that intense feelings can suddenly re-emerge which are beyond the person's control.
- Expect tears. They are a normal part of the grieving process.
- Avoid being judgmental of however the co-worker grieves. Some people may become numb and the grieving process is delayed for weeks or even months after the death.
- Respect the co-worker's privacy, need for solitude and confidentiality.
- Watch out for other employees. Old memories, feelings and grief may be triggered as a result of the co-worker's loss. It may be necessary to honor the old grief separately from the newly grieving co-worker.
- Be careful in sharing stories of your own losses unless you're certain the person can tolerate it.