

Helping Co-workers Cope With Loss

by Dan Bobinski

<http://www.hodu.com/coworker-loss.shtml>

When people are hit sideways with a tragic loss and it throws them for a loop, don't believe for a moment that they're leaving their personal lives at the door. Debilitating diseases, divorce, and death of a loved-one are among the most stressful events one can experience.

The human mind demands time to process such events, and as much as some believe otherwise, we can't turn that processing on or off at will. Processing personal grief takes time, and it can take its toll, too. Quite often, the person experiencing grief is distracted. Attention to detail can suffer. Safe work practices can get ignored. Emotions can run the entire spectrum from angry outbursts to total withdrawal.

Perhaps the most egregious error we can commit in the workplace is expecting someone who's recently experienced loss to be "back to normal" within a few days. Frankly, it's an unrealistic—and unreasonable—expectation.

If it's not your loved one that passed away, two weeks after a funeral can seem like a long time. But to the person who experienced the loss, even a month later, "normal life" will probably still feel out of reach.

In what might be the classic work on grief, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying* outlines five phases a person goes through after experiencing the loss of a loved one:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

To think that a coworker will process all five of those phases in a matter of a few days is, well, somewhere between ignorant and totally insensitive.

Author Joletta McKliget, who writes on the subject of grief, says "No one is immune to grief . . . grief becomes a part of our lives that we must learn to deal with." She also says that despite the well-documented stages of the grieving process, no two people's journeys through it will be the same.

Avoid trying to comfort a grieving person with the phrase, 'I know how you feel.' The truth is we do not know how a grieving person is feeling.

Lots of advice for helping people cope with loss is available. The following are some tips from a variety of grief counseling resources, mental health practitioners, and writers on the subject. The list is by no means complete, but as someone who's been on both sides of this issue recently, I see this list as a good starting point.

1. Avoid trying to comfort a grieving person with the phrase, "I know how you feel." As McKlignet pointed out, no two people grieve the same. Therefore, the truth is we do not know how a grieving person is feeling. "I know how you feel" is certainly well-intended, but a better phrase is probably "I can only imagine how you're feeling."
2. Other phrases to avoid include clichés, such as "time heals all wounds," or "be strong – you'll work through it." Telling someone "at least you still have _____" or "It must have been God's will" is not going to be comforting, either.
3. Practically every resource available on this topic says one of the best things we can do is simply be available. The general idea is to be a presence. Not an advisor, not a counselor, but just an ear. Going to lunch with someone and just listening can be hard, because we want to reach out and help someone feel better. But just listening is one of the best things we can do.
4. Equally powerful can be a simple, handwritten note, such as: "I'm here for you," "I'm thinking of you . . . how can I help?" or "If there's something I can do for you, let me know."
5. If your company allows, donate a vacation day to your grieving co-worker.
6. Organize an ongoing support group that supplies meals, help with child care, housecleaning or yard services, etc. Grieving people often receive these early on after a loss, but when it stops after a short week or two, the loneliness can really set in. As pointed out earlier, if we're not the person experiencing the loss, we move on to other things much faster than the person processing the grief.
7. If you notice signs of self-destructive behavior starting to emerge, it might be appropriate to talk with a supervisor or HR about getting your co-worker hooked up with an employee assistance program. Heavy drinking, drug-use, or signs of severe depression should not be ignored.

Many of us will find ourselves in the position of "being there" for a grieving co-worker at some point. If we're not careful, even a well-intended act may have unintended consequences. Lots of resources are available. Make use of them if you need to.

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Specializing now in Train the Trainer workshops and The Manager as Trainer classes, Dan's prevailing philosophy is that managers also need to learn to think like trainers, equipping those below them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for workplace excellence. Dan can be reached at (208) 375-7606. Visit his thought-provoking blog, and his company website.