

Supporting a Grieving Employee Ideas for Managers

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

Olympia (360) 753-3260 ■ Seattle (206) 281-6315 ■ Spokane (509) 482-3686

As a manager of a grieving employee, you become keenly aware of a balancing act needed to support an employee or a work team and get the needs of the workplace met. You still have work responsibilities and deadlines that must be met. Work still must be done, although initially at lower productivity; and employees must have a safe and productive work environment. As a caring manager, you are also aware of the importance of your workers feeling supported and valued, and that they can contribute to the success of your workplace. This balance can be hard to find and maintain.

Following are some suggestions for maintaining that delicate balance. And if you need additional help, the Employee Assistance Program is there to help you in a consultative way as you work with your affected work force.

The Role of the Manager

- Grief is an important and necessary process for your impacted employee(s), and recovery takes time. Telling an employee to “snap out of it” will not return an employee to a productive life and is not conducive to a comfortable and productive work force.
- Grief work is hard work and is lonely work, and you, as the manager, cannot make it “go away.” Your job as a manager is not to “manage the grief” but to create an environment where work can progress as your employees move through the grief process.
- Your caring support and professionalism can set an example that will last long after the experience and is one of the most conducive elements to beginning the healing process for your work force.
- For your employee who has not yet returned to work, stay in touch. The coworkers themselves may also remain in contact, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.
- Taking care of yourself as an individual and getting guidance and support in your managerial role is very important at this time. Managers can play an important role in workplace healing.

When the Employee Returns to Work

Before your employee comes back to work, ask how you can help. Some questions you might consider with your returning employee include:

- Would you like me or another person to share any information with the others? If so, what information or details would you like them to know?

Supporting a Grieving Employee
Washington State Employee Assistance Program

- Do you want to talk about your experience when you return, or would you prefer to concentrate on the work?
- Are you aware of any special needs at this time? Privacy? Initial reduced work hours? Help to catch up on your work?
- The answers to the above questions may change on a daily basis in the beginning. Employee emotions are not yet stable. Keep asking the questions and listen to your employee's response.
- Offer specific help. Many people in grief will find they are too tired, too numb, too overwhelmed to decide what they need. Help offered such as grocery shopping, childcare, bringing meals, can be a huge help to the employee.
- Don't rely on the worker to bring up the loss. Acknowledge the loss. There really is no right or wrong thing to say. The wrong thing is to say nothing at all.
- Avoid comparisons such as "I know just how you feel because my brother....." What you know is how you felt, and we will not really know what another's feelings might be. Everyone's reactions are very unique.
- Expect to hear repetition in the telling of the story. Part of the healing is telling the story....talking. However, if this is not the proper time or place, you can acknowledge that they want to talk and schedule the conversation at a more appropriate time and place ("I can't talk right now. Can we talk at 3:00PM today?").
- You may also need to set limits. You may find listening is difficult for you at any given time for various reasons. Acknowledge what they are saying is important, but listening is difficult right now.
- A touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone. If you are comfortable doing so, ask permission to hug the person.
- Remember holidays and anniversaries as being especially difficult times for a grieving person. Ask what you can do to provide extra support during these times.