

How to Cope with Loss, Grief, Death & Dying - Professionally & Personally

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Dealing with Death & Grief in the Workplace - Part 1: Employees

See [Part 2](#) for Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors

Introduction - Grief & Loss in the Workplace

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.

Death in the Workplace

People go to work expecting things to be business as usual. At the end of the day, they go home to their families. The last thing anyone expects is for a co-worker to die in the workplace, either from natural causes, or as a result of a tragic event.

When a death occurs in the workplace, the normally orderly environment can quickly turn to one of chaos. If the death occurred as a result of an industrial incident, fire, murder, or similar tragic incident, workers have to deal with additional concerns in addition to the shock, the death of a coworker and the loss of safety in the work environment. Workers and management may be concerned about how and why the incident occurred and what sort of steps are being taken to ensure that another accident will not happen and/or the security is being increased to protect them from future acts of violence. Death in the workplace may result in feelings of anger, guilt, unease, fears for personal safety plus the pervasive need for someone or something to blame.

Workers who witness a fatal accident should consult with their employer to determine what arrangements the employer may have in place for conducting an immediate critical incident debriefing or short-term counseling services.

After a death in the workplace, some families who have lost loved ones at work, may wish to see the site of the death or offer thanks to co-workers who helped their loved one. Similarly, having direct contact with the family may be helpful for some workers. Others may avoid contact with their co-workers family due to the painful memories it may cause. In addition the family will likely appreciate the management contact them promptly. Management should also be available to answer any questions, or to give help to the family, particularly in the early days following the death.

Coping in the Workplace with Significant Loss

Management and co-workers may not appreciate the hardship that grief can cause, particularly in the workplace. The grieving worker may find it helpful to send a letter to their workplace informing their supervisors of the loss and allowing them to pass the information on to colleagues. In doing this the bereaved can let people know what is happening and avoid having to tell and retell the story of their loss over and over again everyone in the office.

A death of a family member or close relative occurs and workers are given a few days to two week off at the most for "bereavement leave" to deal with the immediate issues surrounding the funeral. This may not be sufficient time to make funeral arrangements or for the bereaved person to begin to process the grief. The worker is expected to return to work with the grief still fresh. There is also the implicit, societal expectation that after two weeks one should be "over it" and back to normal.

In contrast, another major loss occurs such as the diagnosis of a major medical condition, the breakup of a long-standing relationship, the death of a friend, or the loss of a cherished pet, but these losses do not meet the criteria for bereavement leave. Thus no time (other than "personal days") is available to take off. People are expected to show up keep functioning—business as usual. There is no time to grieve.

What To Do if You Suffer a Significant Loss:

- Accept that grief is a normal response to loss and healing takes time.
- Anticipate that there will be time when the grief recurs and you may be overcome with the intense emotions anew. Be cognizant of special dates—holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays.
- Realize that not everyone is comfortable dealing with grief. Friends and loved ones may not be able to handle your grief response.
- Search out supportive people who will listen to your story of grief.
- Find other creative ways of coping with the loss.
- Share your feelings with friends and family.
- Ask about the company's policy on bereavement leave and ask for additional leave if needed.
- If necessary, talk with your supervisor or manager about how much time to take off, or arrange for a temporary adjustment in work hours or work load. Negotiate flexible hours if needed.
- Prioritizing tasks can ensure the most important jobs will get done.

People respond to loss differently. Some find it very difficult to return to work, whereas others find it helpful to keep busy; their work diverts them away from grieving, sadness and mourning. For other workers, simply getting back to standard routines and avoiding any special activities or remembrances related to the loss or death, may be the best way of putting the event behind them.

Benefits of returning to work

- Enables the person to return to a known safe environment surrounded by friendly colleagues.
- Encourages the person to resume a regular daily routine again, one of the recommendations for coping with grief.
- Takes the mind off the loss and enables the worker to feel normal for a while.
- Finishing work related tasks, completing work projects may help the bereaved to feel they are still contributing something as part of a team, thus increase their confidence and raise their self esteem.

Difficulties of returning to work

For some people returning to the workplace is an overwhelming burden on them in addition to their grief. They may need extra time off. Once back at work, some workers experience reduced work performance caused by:

- Lack of concentration and memory
- Tiredness from emotion and sleepless nights
- Feelings of depression
- Reduced patience and short temper

Furthermore, grieving workers may also worry they have or will develop a reputation for wasting time, taking too much sick leave, being bad tempered, unreliable, unstable or receiving special treatment.

Grieving workers often worry that they will lose their job from reduced work performance or because of extra time taken from work. They may be tempted to resign for fear of failure or to reduce the dual stressors of work and bereavement

following the loss.

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 public displays of emotions. displaying their emotions publicly and may furthermore 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.

When a Co-worker Is Seriously Ill:

- Stay in touch. Let them know she/he is still part of the team.
- Designate one person to be the office liaison responsible for passing along information.
- Learn what information can be shared with others and what should remain confidential.
- Help the co-worker with practical concerns. Check the company's sick leave and other related policies.
- Organize a plan of calls, notes, food deliveries and other gestures of workplace support that don't require the sick person to interact.

When a Co-worker Dies:

- Arrange for a company meeting. This gives employees permission to grieve and share their feelings. Sudden, accidental or violent deaths may require additional times for people to talk.
- Those who were particularly close with the deceased may need additional support.
- If appropriate, choose someone to serve as the family liaison to organize the company's expression of sympathy be it flowers, cards, or donations, etc.
- Take the time to grieve. Honor the person who died in an appropriate way. Some suggestions:
 - Create a memorial board or book.
 - Collect money for a charitable donation.
 - Hold or participate in a fund-raiser.
 - Create an office memory book for the family.
 - Share tributes in employee newsletters.
 - Conduct a workplace-only event for co-workers to acknowledge their notable relationships with the deceased.
 - Attend the funeral or memorial service.
- Bring in help if you need it. A trained grief counselor can meet and talk with staff.

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.

Workplace Specific Changes

Many times, significant life or work changes contain elements of loss that can be overwhelming and very devastating. Events specific to the workplace include downsizing, reduction-in-force, layoffs, mergers and promotions; these can all potentially produce grief-like responses as workers adjust to the change. The lives of the survivors and the victims of work changes will be transformed.

The victims of work changes must cope with social, interpersonal, and financial adjustments. Those who remain must deal with changes in supervision and reporting lines, loss of co-workers, additional or redesigned work, and uncertainty of their role and value to the company. All of these issues can heighten the sense of loss. Both groups have encountered changes that will forever change their lives, causing them to go through transitions. Workers often feel that the change "happened to them," rather than being their choice or something that was within their control. How people react frequently depends on the individual, their previous work and personal experiences along with their history of past losses. Most worker's reactions to the workplace event will be more about the secondarily associated losses than about the actual change itself.

Ways of Coping with Downsizing or Restructuring

- Acknowledge feelings of anger, betrayal, rejection, disappointment or loss.
- Share these feelings with family, friends, and if appropriate, fellow co-workers.
- Check into specific company policies regarding transfers, replacements, and rehiring.
- If necessary, seek advice from the company's employment or human resources departments.

See **Part 2** for Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors

Resources:

Grieflink. Grief Reactions Associated with the Workplace. 1999. Available at: <http://www.grieflink.asn.au/workplace.html> L€
 Faculty and Staff Assistance Program, (FASAP) University of Michigan. Grief and Loss in the Workplace. Available at:

<http://www.umich.edu/~fasap/health/grief/intro.htm> L€

United Behavioral Health. Grief in the Workplace. Updated September 26, 2001. Available at:

http://www.ubhnet.com/ubh/ubhmain/091101/grief_in_workplace.html L€

Hospice Net. When a Co-worker is Sick or Dying. 1996. Available at: <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/co-worker.html> L€

The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) Coworker Death. 1996. (Brochure) Available as PDF File at:

<http://www.nhpco.org/public/articles/CoworkerDies.pdf> L€

Kodanaz RB. Grief in the Workplace. (Brochure) Colorado Springs, CO: Bereavement Publishing, Inc. , 1997.

Grief at Work: A Guide for Employees and Managers. (Brochure) Washington D.C.: American Hospice Foundation, 1996.

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