

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

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### Dealing with Death & Grief in the Workplace - Part 2: Management

See [Part 1](#) for Guidelines for Employees

#### **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.

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#### **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.
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#### **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.
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### ***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.
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### ***Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors***

Managers and supervisors must assure that the work responsibilities are being met and at the same time their employees feel supported and valued. Balancing these two needs become more challenging when employees have been impacted by personal and/or job loss, accident, or serious or lengthy illness.

Management may have little to no experience in knowing what to do following a death, illness, or work-related death of an employee, especially in dealing with grieving families and employees.

Make sure the employees are informed about whatever public facts surrounding the loss or death are known including: what happened, plans for funeral or memorials, family wishes, etc. Providing factual information will help suppress any rumors regarding the death or event.

It is also helpful to let employees know of resources and grief counselors that can help cope during the stressful times. If possible, employer-provided professional grief counselors should be made available. Counselors specializing in grief can support employees and management with their grief and help restore order in the workplace.

In addition, employees, drawing on their friendships, can support and share with each other. They should be encouraged to participate in expressions of condolences to families and loved ones. It may be helpful for someone who knows the family well to be the contact person in the workplace. This person can talk to the family about what they want, and how best to achieve it, while also considering the needs of the company and its workforce. For families dealing with the death of a loved one in the workplace, the deceased's employer and the claims agent need to be contacted to help in managing the death claim.

Sudden deaths—accident, homicide, suicide, heart attack, overdose—can cause employees to be in a state of shock and disbelief, asking questions such as "what" and "why" it happened. These deaths need to be discussed openly to clarify facts, dispel rumors, and allow grieving to begin. In the case of sudden death it may be helpful to utilize professional grief counseling to facilitate employee meetings.

It is helpful for companies to have a plan in place to assist in responding effectively to a workplace death. Included in this plan should be the use of critical incident stress debriefing for those employees who were directly or indirectly impacted by the death. Employees and managers should know and be prepared for investigation of deaths in the workplace by workplace insurance agents and the Coroner.

Following the death of an employee, the remaining staff members must take on the additional workload. This may cause employees to feel as though a tornado has touched down in the middle of the operation creating chaos. Managers and

supervisors need to determine, divide and distribute the workload. It is also important to thank the employees and acknowledge the strain on the co-workers who are taking on additional workloads while coping with their own feelings of loss and grief.

If the grief impacts many staff members and disrupts normal operations, it may be necessary to arrange for coverage or back-up services to help keep the company or organization running.

Regardless of the cause of death, it is helpful if the management:

- Sends a clear, simple message of support to the grieving person and to other staff to help them cope with the event.
- Maintain an "open door policy" to their staff.
- Provide for a qualified counseling service.

### Ways Management can Helping the Grieving Employee

- Establish contact with the grieving employee(s) as soon as possible.
- Ask about specific things you might do to help: Do they want any information shared with others? Do they need time off? Do they need an adjustment in their work schedule? Do they need help with their work?
- Not knowing what to say and feeling awkward is normal. It is important to acknowledge the grieving employee's loss and grief.
- Handle the situation in a sensitive, straight forward manner.
- Ensure time off for the bereaved employee and any closely affiliated associates to attend the funeral. This gives the employee a chance to say goodbye to their loved one without guilt.
- Intermittent tears and sadness are normal.
- Respect confidentiality of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others. Be sure to find out what can be shared and what is confidential.
- Be patient, compassionate and most of all, available to listen. Anticipate that an employee will need to talk about the loss many times, especially during special dates.
- Don't expect that the grieving person will "snap out of it" or expect their grief will resolve quickly.
- It is important to create an accepting environment where grieving is seen as a normal process that occurs over time, but during which work can still progress.
- Expect the best from grieving employees, however accept less than the best for a time.
- As tasks are re-distributed, be sure to thank the employees dealing with the additional work for their efforts.
- If an individual is not coping well, showing signs of depression or their grieving response is beyond the range of emotions seen in others, seek consultation or refer for counseling.

### Helping Other Employees

Other employees may need to be helped in dealing with the death of an employee. Some suggestions:

- Organizing activities in remembrance of the dead colleague.
- Encouraging thoughtful gestures of sympathy.
- Ensuring bereaved employees have time off to attend the funeral. Friends of the employee should have the chance to say goodbye.
- Holding a special ceremony at the workplace.
- Taking up a collection, establishing a memorial fund for the family.
- Planting a tree onsite or elsewhere.
- Publishing a tribute in the newspaper or company newsletter.

See **Part 1** for Guidelines for Employees

### 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](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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