



# DEALING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS IN THE WORKPLACE

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## WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief affects the way our minds work – how we see the world and ourselves. During times of loss, grief is the filter through which we receive information and made decisions.

Almost all emotions can be part of a grief reaction and many emotions may be experienced with dizzying speed and intensity – fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of our grief. There is no order to your feelings and no time limit on grief.

It hurts when others don't mention our loss – and sometimes it hurts when they do. We need some time alone to get our bearings. We may want to regain our identity by resuming our routine, or even plunge into activities that keep us too busy to feel.



## HELPING A COWORKER DEAL WITH GRIEF

- **Acknowledge your co-worker's loss and grief.** Don't wait until the right thing to say comes to you. There is no right thing. The wrong thing to say is nothing.
- **Personalize what you say.** "I remember how much I loved my brother. I'm so sorry about Ed's death." Shared feelings communicate more than good advice.
- **Avoid comparisons.** "I know just how you feel because my brother Jim died recently too." What you know is how you felt, but we never really know another's feelings. Everyone's relationship and reactions are unique.
- **Offer specific help.** Many people are too tired or numb to decide what help they need. Co-workers can make a meal, run errands or help with childcare.
- **Listen.** Grieving people often need to tell their stories over and over. Listening without judgment or interruption can be the most important gift you can give.
- **Allow the person to grieve at his or her own pace.** Your ability to not judge the length of time it takes will be a sense of relief to the person grieving and avoid placing pressure on him or her to conform to what other people think is the "right way" to grieve.

## SUPPORTING EACH OTHER IN THE WORKPLACE

- Respect privacy. You may be hearing personal and privileged information that should not be repeated. Honor closed doors and quiet moments.
- Watch out for other employees; vivid memories and feelings may surface. Some unspoken grief may become noticeable.
- Include the grieving employees in social plans. Sometimes a lighthearted outing may be a great help to someone who is feeling isolated.
- When tasks need to be re-distributed, thank staff members for their extra effort. They're sharing both the emotional burden and the additional work.
- Support the efforts of others to help the employee. This sad time can be an opportunity to increase staff awareness of mutual support, teamwork and the values that are part of your work together.



## GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE

Sudden terminal illness and death can be a shock and deep loss to any of us, both in our personal lives, and in the workplace. When a co-worker or one of their family members dies suddenly or becomes terminally ill, our productivity and the dynamics of our workplace are greatly affected. We probably have spent many hours with that person, and consider him or her not just a coworker, but also a friend.

With the death of a co-worker, often we do not think of them ever leaving unless it is to retire or take another position. Death of a co-worker can touch peoples' feelings about their work and workplace, their own lives, and their own fears about death and dying. People who work together can become like extended family, and when they suffer a loss, friends and co-workers grieve. When the death is unexpected, as from violence, accident, suicide or sudden terminal illness, it can be even more traumatic to the co-workers who did not have a chance to say goodbye.





## THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to individually process. We do not follow or heal according to a timetable, but over time our emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the wake and funeral only touches on the beginning stages of grief. The feelings and symptoms can be different for each of us. They may include shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorder, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and problems with concentration. Some outcomes of grief may include:

- Finding a new balance (which doesn't necessarily mean that things will ever be the same).
- Growth (which means readiness to move ahead with one's life). Most of the time we feel several of these emotions at the same time, but in varying degrees. It is also important to remember that it is possible to move back and forth between emotions and that certain times, such as anniversary dates or birthdays, may be more intense or difficult. The extent, depth and duration will depend on how close we were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and our own situation and losses that we have experienced.

# SOME THINGS YOU MIGHT DO IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED THE LOSS OF A CO-WORKER

- **Attend the funeral or memorial service** - This gives you a chance to say goodbye and offer condolences to the family.
- **Conduct a work-place only event** - A luncheon or office memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.
- **Hold or participate in some type of collection** - This can be done for a special cause or for the family and children of the deceased, if appropriate.



- **Create a memorial** - A photo, card, or special item the person kept on his or her desk might be a way to remember. Or you might consider putting up a plaque or picture of the deceased in an area as a remembrance. Depending on space and the situation, planting a tree at the work-site can also be done.
- **Create a book of memories** - This can be given to the family as a way to let them know of their loved one's work life. These can become unique memories for the family, and a way for you to privately express feelings and memories. It is also a helpful way of letting them know their loved one was a valued employee and is missed.

# WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER THE LOSS OF A CO-WORKER

- **People experience grief differently** - You or your co-worker who was particularly close to the person who died may feel depressed, absent-minded, short-tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.
- **Creating healthy memories is part of healing** - Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or tend to cope differently.
- **A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality** - If a co-worker dies, we may feel guilty or angry at that person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life and how temporary life is with those we love. These are all normal reactions and emotions.
- **Be aware of how you may react to a deceased co-worker's replacement or even clearing their work area** - Your anger and disappointment at his or her performance, personality, or work style may be less about the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing. Clearing the work area is a policy matter that management must adhere to and not about trying to erase the person's memory too quickly.
- **Seek Help** - Be aware that there may be times when talking to a trained professional might be helpful, especially if you are having ongoing difficulty dealing with the loss or if your work performance is suffering. This can be a signal that this loss or others are affecting you more profoundly than you thought.

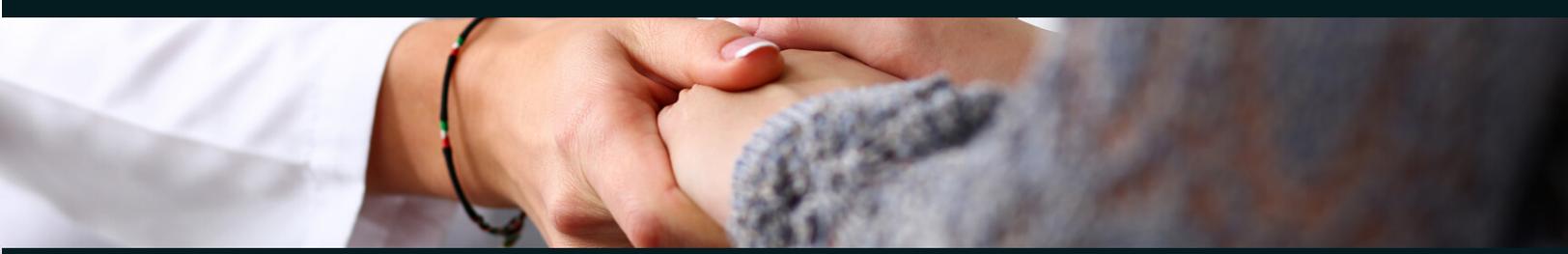
# THE DEATH OF A CO-WORKER

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# THE DEATH OF A CO-WORKER'S LOVED ONE

Sudden terminal illness and death can be a shock and deep loss to any of us, both in our personal lives, and in the workplace. When a co-worker's family member dies suddenly, our productivity and the dynamics of our work place are greatly affected. We probably have spent many hours with that person, and consider him or her not just a coworker, but also a friend. Death can touch peoples' feelings about their work and workplace, their own lives, and their own fears about death and dying. People who work together can become like extended family, and when they suffer a loss, friends and co-workers grieve.



## HOW TO SUPPORT A CO-WORKER EXPERIENCING A LOSS

- Take the time to offer your condolences and caring support to your co-worker and their family.
- Allow yourself time to grieve for your co-worker's loss and also for the losses you have faced.
- It may be difficult, but let your co-worker know that you are thinking about them, while still allowing them their quiet moments.
- Attend the visitation, funeral or memorial service if possible.