

Grief in the Workplace

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.

Each person's experience of loss and each grief response is unique.

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 co-worker, supervisor or employer. Those who feel cared for and supported are more likely to have improved recovery.

Employees who have lost a co-worker due to death might experience a number of feelings over the days and weeks following the death. Each individual's experience will vary and all are normal reactions to loss and aid in the healing process. **Common experiences following a loss are:**

- Shock and/or disbelief
- Depression and isolating from others
- Anger, frustration, and guilt
- Sadness and tearfulness
- Change in eating habits
- Increased anxiety
- Irritability or agitation
- Absentmindedness and poor concentration
- Increased drug or alcohol use

Physiological symptoms may include:

- Abdominal pain
- Headaches, muscle tension
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Changes in appetite
- Restlessness

These emotions and symptoms of grief response can significantly impact a person's ability to function.

How to help with the grief process:

- Acknowledge that things are different
- Allow yourself to feel sad; cry if you feel like crying
- Talk with a trusted friend
- Get plenty of rest; If you cannot sleep, get out of bed and read or work on a project until you are tired enough to sleep
- Exercise
- Utilize the support of your family, friends, and co-workers
- Be aware of overreacting so as not to lash out at your co-workers or family
- Recognize that grief changes over time; not everyone will have the same reaction or time

Ideas for the Workplace:

- Arrange for a company meeting. This gives employees permission to grieve and share their feelings
- 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.

Finding the New Normal

It may be a difficult process to establish the new norm for the office. There may be employees or customers who were not aware of the death and this can cause an uncomfortable conversation if a coworker must continually inform people of their fellow coworker's death. There may be some workplace things to help you during the initial stages of the death. Some recommendations are:

- Forward the phones from the desk of the deceased to another employee's desk; do not forward them to an employee that was very close to them deceased as this may cause additional distress
- Do not rush to clear the space of the deceased
- It is okay to talk about the deceased employee; this helps with the grief process

There is no time limit on the grief process. Everyone must be allowed to handle their grief in their own way and it is important for each employee to support each other through this difficult process.