

## When Someone in the Workplace Dies

People at work spend a good part of their daily lives together. When an employee dies, it is like having a member of your extended family die, and the sense of loss and grief can be profound.

Attend the funeral or memorial service. Give sympathy to family members and friends.

Organize a workplace memorial. Set aside a special time for workers to gather, share their memories, and honor the person who died. This could be during the lunch hour or at the beginning or close of the workday.

Have a counselor come to work. Arrange for a counselor to meet with groups of employees who were particularly traumatized and upset by the employee's death.

Create a "Memory Book." Allow employees to express personal feelings and memories about the employee in a book. The book can be offered as a gift to the family in memory of their loved one.

Collect money and donate it. Giving a contribution in honor of the person to a charitable organization or an educational institution is a meaningful way to pay tribute to the employee's life and service to others.

Create a space for grief. Often people, in their grief, spontaneously leave flowers, notes, or special items in a meaningful place. At work, this could be the person's desk or office, or a bulletin board nearby.

Grieving is a normal process we all experience when someone we care about dies. The emotions we feel are painful and we may want to push the pain away or deny it is there. The emotions will not go away, however; they will, instead, lie in wait to be expressed sooner or later.

If your loss is particularly painful, you may want to seek help from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). A counselor can offer support and give you the opportunity to share your grief freely.

During the grieving process, people usually experience the reactions below. They do not necessarily have these emotions in sequence or in equal degrees. You will find that some of you will want to talk about your grief and others will not choose to do so. There is no "right way" to grieve and it is important to respect these differences and focus on your own personal process.

**Shock** - When a person dies suddenly, shock and numbness is usually the first response you may feel. It may seem like you don't "feel anything," and you are just going through the motions of being at work, but not being totally present.

**Denial** - You may feel like the situation is "unreal" or "unbelievable," or you may just flat out deny that the person has died. This is a natural coping mechanism that cushions the blow of the news of a death of someone we care for in our lives.

**Anger** - You may suddenly feel angry. It is a normal reaction to death, and it can be directed to anyone or anything. You could find yourself angry with God, at the person's family, at yourself, your boss, your fellow workers. You may even find yourself feeling angry toward the person who has died, and feeling guilty about it. Allow the anger to take its normal course. It will pass.

**Guilt** - "If only I had known" or "I should have done more" or "I wish I hadn't said that" are all feelings of regret or guilt that may haunt you during parts of your grieving. Most people experience these nagging voices; this guilt will pass.

**Sadness** - Sadness and tears are an important part of grieving. It is normal to feel pain over the loss of someone, and to experience feelings of loneliness and sadness. The loss can also trigger feelings about previous losses you have experienced. This is also normal.

**Acceptance & Growth** - Eventually the process of grieving brings one to a place of acceptance and the opportunity to grow personally from the experience. Many people seek meaning in their loss and may channel their energy to special causes that help others. Acceptance never means forgetting: it means moving forward with special memories.