

How to Deal with Grief in the Workplace

People spend many hours of their lives with co-workers, and a co-worker's death can be as devastating as losing a loved one. This is both a personal and professional loss for a business. If the death occurred while at work, surviving workers may feel survivor's guilt, anger and concern for their personal safety.

Management

It is important for managers to recognize the impact a death has on co-workers. Compassionate managers will find that employees benefit from caring, flexibility and respect for their pain.

When a manager is notified of the death of an employee, he or she should inform the staff as soon as possible. Note that some employees may find it difficult to continue to work that day. In accordance with company policy, employees should be informed as to whether it is OK to go home.

While every workplace culture differs, there are additional things a manager can do to assist his or her employees:

- Encourage employees to express their feelings.
- Provide an "open door" policy to all staff who wish to speak about their grief.
- Encourage employees to seek outside support, including using the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Be on the lookout for a co-worker that is having a particularly difficult time.
- Arrange a workplace memorial service to honor the departed employee(s).
- If the business permits, offer flexible working hours or the ability to work from home so that employees have time to grieve.
- Be compassionate to co-workers who may be experiencing a decline in productivity and a difficult time coping.

Managers should work with human resources specialists and refer to company policy to establish protocols for responding to a worker's death, including issues such as:

- Sharing information about cause of death
- Handling personal effects
- Allowing time off for co-workers to attend visitations, funerals or memorials.

Employees may want to reach out and contact their co-worker's family members. Managers should gather information about how or when the family would like to hear from people. Additionally, convey any information about other wishes if the family would rather be left alone.

Employees

A co-worker's death can be devastating for surviving employees. Everyone grieves differently; some co-workers may want to discuss the issue, while others may want to grieve privately. There are several ways employees can try to cope with their grief:

- Be on the lookout for a co-worker that is having a particularly difficult time.

- Be compassionate to fellow co-workers who may be experiencing a decline in productivity and a difficult time coping.
- If there is a new hire who is occupying the job (and possibly the workstation) of the departed employee, accept and welcome this person.
- Arrange to go to the funeral and support each other.
- Plan a memorial service for the departed co-worker.
- Plan social outings as a group to help morale.

Grief is a natural process that requires time. If, even days or weeks later, an employee has difficulty accepting a co-worker's death, consider consulting with a mental health professional. The EAP can also help with suggestions and therapy sessions.

Remembering the Employee

In addition to the funeral or memorial service of the deceased, employees may wish to have another way to remember their co-worker. Some ways to do this include:

- Hold a separate memorial service.
- Create a memorial board where co-workers can post messages or memories.
- Create a memory book for the family.
- Remember the person at staff meetings or annual events.
- Hold or join in a fundraiser for a special cause in memory of the deceased.
- Establish a scholarship or other fund in the name of the deceased.
- Keep that co-worker's locker or desk empty in memorial.
- Plant a tree on the company grounds.
- Put up a plaque or memorial item to denote the service of the employee.

Resources

EAP www.guidanceresources.com 1-800-964-3577
 American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
 National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
 National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org
 AARP: www.aarp.org
 American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
 National Funeral Directors Association: www.nfda.org

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