



balancing human needs

and those of the organization are most difficult when serious illness or death enters the workplace.

Flexibility and communication are the keys to successfully balancing your managerial responsibilities and desire for compassion. Every office and its culture are unique, but one thing is certain: the company's attitude and actions, and the example the manager sets, are critical. They determine not only how the staff react to the immediate situation, but the long-term impact on the company.



## DEALING WITH A SERIOUSLY ILL EMPLOYEE

### **Respect the sick person's desire for privacy.**

Ask the person how much, or how little he would like co-workers to know, and how they should be told. Encourage some disclosure. Speculation and rumors about a person's illness or prognosis can do more damage in the workplace than any honest acknowledgement of the illness.

**Support the sick person as much as possible,** but not at the expense of office morale and productivity.

### **Encourage private staff discussion.**

People may have questions and want to help their co-worker. They may also feel overwhelmed by added responsibilities. They may even be angry — at working extra hours, or as a reflection of their own fears about death and dying. There may be a need to consult with a mental health professional to address fears. These conversations will give you insights into how well your staff is **really** functioning.

### **Tell your supervisor.**

This should be part of your agreement with the sick person. Anything that affects your staff's performance has the potential to affect not only your work and career, but your supervisor's. Your boss can help you share the burden, offer additional resources if needed, and be supportive if you have to take additional personnel steps.

### **Keep the workplace functioning.**

This is your first responsibility. Perhaps the sick person can no longer handle his or her responsibilities. Are continued absences causing the work to suffer? Are co-workers confused or stressed? Early action, before the situation becomes critical, can help resolve problems. Some steps to consider:

- Acknowledge extra efforts by co-workers.
- Bring in additional staff (this is where your supervisor can help).
- Transfer the sick person to a less stressful area. Reduce responsibilities. Suggest part-time, non-supervisory work, or a time-specific project.
- Appoint an acting head of the area.

Ultimately, disability retirement or medical leave may be the only recourse.

Note: The with Disabilities Act and other personnel related laws address steps you may take with an employee who discloses an illness or who is ill. Before taking any specific personnel action you may want to check with a human resource specialist.

## **MAINTAINING OFFICE CONNECTIONS**

A staff or co-worker's serious illness reminds us of our own mortality. We sometimes shy away from sick people — as though the condition were catching. Make sure the sick person is included in key meetings and invited to office social gatherings. She may decline, but the offer has been extended.

## **KEEPING CONTACT WITH AN ABSENT EMPLOYEE**

For a seriously ill or dying person, the connection to work life can be vitally important. Sharing office business and staff news keeps the sick person from feeling isolated.

Managers and staff need to maintain connections while balancing the desire for privacy, and the degree the disease affects the sick person's energy level.

### ***Encourage the staff to “stay in touch.”***

Designate one person to be the office liaison, responsible for passing along information on how the sick person is doing, what she needs, and how much contact she feels up to.

### ***Call and visit the sick person periodically yourself.***

Your staff will notice when you do — or if you're “too busy.”

### ***Encourage cards, letters, and food deliveries.***

An informal office video in which everyone says hello is a great way to stay in touch, can help office morale, and create a sense of community in the face of a crisis.



## IF AN EMPLOYEE DIES

People who work together are like an extended family, and when a “family member” dies, co-workers grieve. Understanding the feelings and symptoms of grief can help you manage yourself, and your staff, during this difficult time.

### THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to manifest and evolve. People don't heal on a timetable, but over time the emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. Experts describe the feelings, symptoms and outcomes of grief in various ways.

Broadly speaking, the feelings and symptoms of grief may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and concentration difficulties.

Some outcomes of grief may include: finding a new balance (which doesn't necessarily mean that things will be the same) and growth (readiness to move ahead with one's life.)

Some people experience the feelings of grief in this order. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. Over time as the person works through their grief, their emotions become less intense,

and they begin to find a new balance in their life. The extent, depth, and duration of the feelings will also depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and their own situation. For example, a sudden, unexpected death can be particularly difficult.

**Give employees the opportunity to grieve.**

When the person dies, inform the staff immediately, individually if possible. Allow them time to attend the funeral (without charging them leave time). Small office? Hire a temporary to answer phones so that **all** who wish to attend may. Help employees channel their immediate and ongoing grief. Some things they can do:

- Create a memorial board. This acknowledges the loss but allows the work to proceed.
- Hold or participate in a fund-raiser for a special cause or for the family of the deceased.
- Create a book of memories to give to the family. Many people are not aware of the work-life of people they love. These will be unique memories for the family — and a way for staff to privately express their feelings and memories.
- Conduct a workplace-only event. An employee-only service or even a luncheon can give the staff an opportunity to talk openly about their co-worker.

**Be aware that the death may affect employee productivity and motivation.**

When a co-worker dies, the often unemotional work world is suddenly out of our control. “It can’t happen to me” just happened to the person in the next office. Expect some loss of productivity, motivation, and mistakes, especially from people close to the deceased.

**Pay attention to co-workers’ reactions to the person’s replacement.**

The new employee may face resentment, anger and a lack of cooperation from co-workers that have nothing to do with abilities or work style — but a lot to do with grieving over the previous staff member. Acknowledging that this is the case can help alleviate tensions.



## WHEN AN EMPLOYEE SUFFERS A LOSS

Managers more frequently encounter a situation in which an employee loses a parent, spouse, long-time companion, close relative, or even a child. Typical work policies may allow up to three days off — or a week if the death is of a spouse or child. The effects and impact of the loss do not end after this time. The grief may not affect work permanently, but can manifest itself over a period of time. As a manager, you need to be concerned about the immediate situation, and the long-term effect on your staff person.

### ***Ask the grieving employee***

what information about the loss they would like communicated and to whom.

### ***Set an example.***

Many people are often afraid to say the “wrong thing,” or are so fearful of death that they shy away from someone who has suffered a loss. A personal call or note from you is appropriate to express condolences, as are office-wide flowers or a card. Doing and/or saying nothing says a lot about your company’s concern for employees.

## **JOB PERFORMANCE AND GRIEF**

The initial reaction to death is often shock and denial. Lack of motivation, mistakes, confusion, and an inability to concentrate are all “symptoms” of grief.



A grieving employee will not be fully functional, and performance may be below normal standards for weeks.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### ***Ask the employee what you can do***

to help relieve some of the work stress he or she may be feeling.

If performance consistently continues to lag, you have the right — and the obligation, as the manager — to raise your concerns with the bereaved person. Some signals that the person who has suffered a loss may be experiencing difficult grief include:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Indications the person is not sleeping or eating.
- Changes in personal habits, i.e. clothing, hygiene, coming to work, going home.
- Inability to work. The person may continue to be distracted, be overly absorbed, or make repeated mistakes.
- Attitude problems. A normally calm person may be angry; an aggressive person suddenly becomes passive. Conflicts with staff may also escalate.

*Note: the employee who has suffered a major loss such as the loss of a spouse or child, yet seems to show **no** symptoms of grief and acts as though nothing has happened, may be more at risk than one who shows these emotions.*

**Be prepared to offer counseling resources,** information on support groups and some suggested reading materials to the bereaved employee.

**Refer the person to your employee assistance program (EAP),** or obtain information from that office.

**Suggest places that offer support outside the office environment.**

Many organizations throughout the community offer bereavement support services. Area hospices work with individuals and families before and after a death, and are experienced in helping with workplace grief issues. They may also be able to come to your workplace to talk about these issues.

Remember, death is hard to discuss — but facing it and the grief it causes will help you and your staff survive these difficult times.

The following related publications are also available from the National Hospice Organization:

*A Guide To Grief*

*Grief in the Workplace: When a Co-worker Is Ill or Dies*

*Grief in the Workplace: When a Co-worker Suffers a Loss*

Additional copies of this brochure are available for sale through the NHO Store. To order, please call 1-800-646-6460.

To receive written information about hospice, or to be put in touch with a hospice serving your community, call the National Hospice Helpline at 1-800-658-8898.



This brochure was originally developed by the Hospice Council of Metropolitan Washington.



Copyright 1996, National Hospice Organization, Arlington, Virginia. All rights reserved.

Item Number: 713453

ISBN 0-931207-46-0

