



It is not uncommon for a co-worker to lose a parent, grandparent, spouse, companion, or even a child.

Many of us feel awkward when someone dies. We don't know what to say, what to do, or what to expect from ourselves — or our co-worker. Whether or not you are close, a better understanding of the grieving experience can help you and your co-worker get through a 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.)

Generally, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. The extent, depth, and duration of the process will also depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and their own situation.



WHAT TO SAY

A simple word means a great deal when a person suffers a loss. Saying the “wrong” thing hurts less than saying nothing at all.

Appropriate words include:

“I am sorry to hear about your loss.”

“I heard about your loss. I don’t know what to say.”

“Remember the story you told me about.... [the deceased].” A simple shared memory is helpful.

Avoid these phrases

“I know just how you feel.” Each person’s loss is unique.

“It was God’s will,” or “God never gives us more than we can bear.” “At least she isn’t suffering.”

“At least you have another child.” or “You are still young enough to have another child.”

“You’re not over it yet? It’s been six weeks, two months, etc.”

“You’ll get over it.”



WHAT TO EXPECT

A person who experiences a loss may seem depressed, withdrawn, short tempered, absent minded, or exhausted.

Grief creates a tide of emotion that can't always be controlled. Expect it. Remember the grieving person's reactions are not directed at you. Just being supportive will help.

Creating healthy memories is part of healing, so your co-worker may want to talk about the deceased.

Your desire to be sympathetic should not keep you from your work.

Set limits by suggesting that you talk during a break, at lunch or after work. Example: "Jim, I know this is a difficult time for you, but it's hard for me to listen right now. Could we talk during lunch?"

Expect that 3-6 months after the loss the grieving person may still not be "his old self."

Grief doesn't heal on a timetable.

Be prepared for emotional feelings yourself.

A death generates questions and fears about our own life and our own mortality. "It couldn't happen to me" just happened to your co-worker's husband. A death close to home, such as when a child dies, can evoke particularly strong emotions. These are all normal feelings.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Be aware of what your co-worker is experiencing.

Listen, but know you can't resolve the grief.

You can help, but not heal.

Ask if you can help out.

Perhaps taking over a simple task such as chairing a meeting or preparing a weekly report once or twice can help overcome a difficult period. Be specific in your offer and follow up with action.

Include the grieving person in your work life.

She may want time alone — but staying away to “spare painful feelings” may only add to the sense of loss and isolation. The grieving person may decline your offer, but will appreciate that it was made.

Alert your supervisor

if the grieving person seems to be getting worse, talks about suicide or exhibits severe, continuing, disfunction. Covering up will not help. Some symptoms to watch for:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Substance abuse
- Indications the person is not sleeping or eating.
- Changes in personal habits, such as clothing, hygiene, coming to work late, or going home early.

- Inability to work. The person may continue to be distracted, be overly absorbed or make repeated mistakes.
- A major personality change, e.g., the person is argumentative, or becomes unusually passive.

Ask occasionally about the deceased.

You may have forgotten, but the grieving person hasn't.

SUGGESTIONS AND RESOURCES

If your office has an employee assistance program (EAP), refer your co-worker to it, or obtain information from that office.

Many organizations in 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. Hospices conduct bereavement support groups, and most are available to *anyone* in the community who has suffered a loss. Hospice bereavement counselors are also available to come to your place of business to talk about grief issues.

Remember, death is hard to discuss — but facing it and the grief it causes will help you and your co-workers survive a difficult period.

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

A Guide To Grief

Grief in the Workplace: A Guide for Managers

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

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.



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