

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Dealing with a Death in the Workplace

We spend a lot of time at work and, for many, colleagues can be like an extended family. When a co-worker becomes terminally ill or dies, it affects everyone in some way and changes the dynamic of the work group. Emotional reactions to the death of a colleague will differ depending on the circumstances of the death and the relationship each person had with the co-worker who has died.

Responses to a death in the workplace

Each person's reaction to the death of a co-worker will depend on the circumstances and suddenness of the death, our relationship with the co-worker, our own physical and emotional health, and our religious and personal beliefs.

For some, grief is immediate. Others can experience unexpected feelings much later. Although everyone responds differently, there are some general reactions many will share. Even if the co-worker was known to be ill, the first reaction is generally shock and disbelief. Some may also feel guilt about past conflicts or for not having said good-bye.

For most, after shock and disbelief comes sadness. Some feel deeply saddened at the loss of a friend, or for the family members who have been left behind. If a person died young or unexpectedly, it can also be common to feel angry. Often, feelings of emptiness emerge upon the realization that someone we once knew is gone forever.

Workplace accidents

When the death of a coworker is unexpected or is the result of a workplace accident, the reaction and grief process is different from other forms of loss. If co-workers are traumatized by the events surrounding the death (e.g., an accident or assault), they may suffer from shock and become emotionally numb, making it difficult to come to terms with the death or start the grieving process.

Sometimes, when the cause of the death is uncertain, or there are questions around how the accident happened, a state of "suspended animation," may delay the grief process. In such cases, the employer may conduct meetings with counselors. These sessions help participants talk about the traumatic event, establish the facts, and offer guidance to help normalize feelings and deal with the impact.

Terminal illness

When we find out that a coworker is terminally ill, we sometimes begin to grieve even before their death. Sometimes our concern about saying the "wrong thing" causes us to avoid or limit conversations with this person. We can even find ourselves treating the sick person differently as we anticipate their death. This may limit the dying person's sense of support and community when they need it most.

If you are unsure about what to do or say, let the person who is sick take the lead on whether or not they wish to discuss it, and only if they've told you about their illness already. Continue to interact with them normally. Don't be afraid to ask, "How are you?" It may offer your colleague an opportunity to share with you.

Suggestions on how to support a colleague who is terminally ill:

- **Listen.** This is generally appreciated as a sign of support and caring.
- **Be honest.** Simply state "I don't know what to say" or "It hurts me to see you so sick." This allows your colleague to be honest with you without fear.
- **Avoid clichés.** They reveal how uncomfortable we are.

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- **Be supportive and find practical ways to help if needed.** Offer a ride to work or assist with a project that has a tight deadline.

Getting back to routine

When a family member or friend dies, we take time off to grieve. When a coworker dies, an entire group, department or organization is affected, but work cannot stop altogether. Still, it’s also not "business as usual." After all, the departed coworker has left a specific personal and professional hole in the organization and the lives of its employees.

It is important to accept that the emotional environment of the workplace will be affected as people grieve. It can be helpful for co-workers to acknowledge and discuss the impact of the death, especially if it was workplace-related. Counselors can help employees understand the grieving process and deal with the loss.

The stages of grief

Grief is one of life's most stressful events. Loss changes our lives. It takes time to heal.

Stage 1: Numbness or shock. This follows immediately after the news of the death and can last several weeks or months.

Stage 2: Disorganization. As the shock begins to subside, physical symptoms such as fatigue or trouble breathing can appear. Emotional distress, such as anger, guilt or emptiness may also emerge. For many, this stage can take weeks, months or even years.

Stage 3: Re-organization. Eventually we stop dwelling on the loss and begin to focus on daily tasks. While we may never entirely stop grieving or feeling the loss, we may gain a new awareness of and appreciation for life, people and experiences.

While each person may react differently to loss, everyone needs time to grieve. Talk about the loss with friends, family and coworkers. Attend the funeral or memorial service and show your support for the coworker's family. Get support or assistance if you need it.