



LOSING A CO-WORKER

Losing a co-worker, even if you're not close to them, can lead to experiencing grief. Whether or not our loss was expected, the effects of grief on the mind, body and spirit can be very disorienting.

AN OVERVIEW

Grief comes with any loss, whether a tangible loss like the death of a person, or an intangible loss such as a divorce or the loss of a job. Every death we experience brings forth other loss experiences. When a co-worker dies, it is not uncommon for this event to trigger unresolved grief around other issues in our lives. You may find yourself remembering previous losses or traumatic events, and being affected by them. The death of a colleague can also force us to confront our own mortality. This can lead to questions about some of the basic assumptions we make in day to day life. Do not be surprised if you find yourself feeling disoriented or distracted for a period of time. You may find you have to reorganize how your work is accomplished, which can be an added stressor, as is any change in routine.

WAYS THAT GRIEF CAN AFFECT YOU

- **Physically** – Fatigue, illness, respiratory or gastrointestinal distress, changes in sleeping patterns or appetite.
- **Emotionally** – Emotions can feel extreme, can change quickly, and be seemingly at odds with the loss. You may go from happy to sad in an instant or suddenly find yourself laughing or crying in situations where the response seems inappropriate.
- **Cognitively** – Difficulties with concentration, memory, a sense of disorientation, “fuzziness” and a noticeable difficulty in organizing thoughts or tasks.

YOU'RE NOT CRAZY

Grief is a psychological process that the medical

community recognizes as necessary to allow our mind to adjust to loss. It is common for healthy people to form different types of relationships with different people in every aspect of life, including the work setting. Our mind works hard to protect itself from loss, often by trying very hard to find the person that is missing. It is common to:

- Talk to the person who died
- See the person who died and return to places where they spent time
- Hear the voice of the deceased
- Repeatedly “forget” that he or she has died

To some degree, our brain is trying to deny death. Initially, this denial is useful. It gives us time to adjust to the idea that the loss is real and acts as an “emotional buffer”.

AT THE COMPANY LEVEL

Generally speaking, it is wise to familiarize yourself with company policies around bereavement or work related deaths before a death occurs. However, the reality is that this is something we rarely do. Ideally, the company will have policies in place and have some opportunity for co-workers to gather in community. This may be to share memories of the deceased, to talk about the individual experience of the death, and to clarify what is available in terms of support. Support may include an in-service or counseling event, an opportunity for co-workers to assist the family of the deceased, or allowing co-workers to have or attend a simple memorial.



LOSING A CO-WORKER [CONTINUED]

Whether or not you are close to the person, or the death was expected, this represents a change in your work environment and a change in the community of your co-workers. It can be difficult and stressful. Hopefully this information will provide you with some basic tools to cope with the loss of a co-worker.

AT THE COMPANY LEVEL (CONTINUED)

If these things are not formally offered by the company, talk to your HR supervisor to find out what is available. It is not necessary to “push” people to confront the death who may not wish to do so. However it is important to allow people the opportunity to process their experience of the death if they so desire.

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

It is important to recognize that everyone has a different grieving style. Factors influencing this may include gender, culture, past experiences with loss, temperament or age. Difference in grieving styles does not mean a difference in caring. Some people grieve by reaching out to relationships to share feelings. Others grieve by “doing” and focusing on practical tasks. It is important to allow each other the permission to grieve in your own way. Below are some suggestions for ways to help each other in a way that works for you.

- Don't just do something, sit there! It's ok to not have answers when someone is upset. The truth is, most of the time, folks don't need you to know what to do, they just need you to listen in silence. Sit quietly, hold a hand, let them work it out and be with them without judgement.
- Follow their lead. They will let you know if they want to talk about what's going on or if they would rather be distracted. When in doubt, be direct. “I don't know what to say or do but I want you to know I care,” is just fine.

- Perhaps you are a person who has a very hard time dealing with strong emotions. That's ok. When trying to help others, follow your strengths. Perhaps you can offer to take on an extra task for a co worker who is overwhelmed, buy them a cup of coffee or leave a nice note on their desk. You don't need grand gestures, just sincere ones.



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