

Coping with the Death of a Co-Worker

When a co-worker dies, it can have a significant impact on those in the workplace. There is an element of "family" in most work units. People get to know one another, as they work side by side and share work and personal experiences. Sometimes co-workers become close friends and spend time together outside of work. Others keep their relationship at work but develop a deep connection from working together. Some people do not develop close ties at work and reserve their intimate relationships to outside family and friends.

The effects of the loss of a co-worker will be determined by many factors, including, but not limited to: the number of years worked together, the nature of the relationship, the age of the deceased, the suddenness of the death, and other challenges that may be facing the work group and its staff and/or faculty at the time of the loss.

The Grieving Process

Depending on the nature of your relationship with your deceased coworker, you may or may not go through a grieving process following the death. Grief is a universal, natural, and normal response to significant loss of any kind. It is how we process and heal from an important loss. It can be a painful and tiring experience. Understanding the grieving experience, and how best to cope with it, can help in your recovery from grief of any kind.

Stages of Grief

Within the first few weeks to months after a death, you may find yourself riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. Most people go through these stages not in linear steps, but in unpredictable waves -- moving through one stage to the next and sometimes shifting back. Some people will experience certain stages but not others. Here are some common, typical grief reactions:

- **Shock and Disbelief**
You may experience the numbing and disorienting sense that the death has not really happened. This feeling can last from several hours to several days.
- **Anger**
You may feel anger at the deceased, yourself, others, and/or your God for what has happened.
- **Guilt**
You may blame yourself for not doing or knowing more, or for not dealing with any "unfinished business" that you had with the deceased.
- **Sadness**
You may experience a deep sense of loss and find yourself crying. There may be a tendency to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities, or feel helpless or hopeless. Other recent or past losses may come back to you to deal with again.

- **Fear**
There may be anxiety or panic, or fears about the future. It may bring up your fears about your own sense of mortality.
- **Acceptance**
Finally, hopefully, you adjust to the loss and move on from it while still honoring your deceased's memory.

Other Effects of Grief

People experiencing grief may experience an accompaniment of physical reactions such as:

- Fatigue
- Sleep disruption
- Appetite changes
- Tenseness, and aches and pains

Common psychological symptoms include:

- Feeling distracted
- Forgetful
- Irritable
- Disoriented
- Confused

Ways to Cope with the Loss

Acknowledge the Loss

It is better to give each other permission to talk about what has happened and its impact than to go on as if nothing had happened. It may be helpful to allot time at staff meetings for people who want to check in on how they are doing.

Acknowledge Individual Reactions

When a co-worker dies, it affects each person in the work unit in a very different way. Some are deeply affected by the loss, while others are not. Some people want to talk about their feelings, while others want to deal with them in private. Some may take some much longer than others to adjust to the loss. Be aware of the different ways that people react to the loss and respect those differences.

Be Kind to Each Other

This is not an easy time for the work unit and many adjustments have to be made. People may not be at their best. Cut each other some slack; be gentle and understanding with one another during this time. Find ways to cooperate to share any additional workload.

Self-Care

You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you - rest, relaxation, exercise, diversions. Grief can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Express your thoughts and feelings to trusted people, because that can be most helpful. For some, it helps to write things down as a means of expression.

Give Yourself and Others Time

In our culture, there is a tendency to deny the effects of loss and expect ourselves and others to quickly "get over" a loss. We also fail to acknowledge that the anniversary of losses can trigger a recycling of loss reactions. Allow yourself and others the time it takes for each individual to process the loss.

Funeral and Memorial Events

Provide information for everyone on arrangements that have been made and when feasible, provide time to attend for those who are interested. If the events are out of town, people may want to find ways to memorialize the loss locally. However, be mindful that each family is different and may choose not to publish funeral or memorial event information.

Honor the Lost Coworker

Consider honoring the person who died in an appropriate way, e.g., collecting money for a charity, creating a memorial book or bulletin board or sending a letter to the deceased's loved ones.

Be Resourceful

You may need some professional assistance if you find yourself not able to function as you would like as a result of the loss. Perhaps you have suffered other recent losses as well. You can call Employee Assistance for an individual appointment for a free and confidential consultation with a licensed staff mental health professional.

Employee Assistance staff are available to meet with employees or family members who are experiencing difficulties. Call for a free, confidential appointment at 510-643-7754



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