

Supporting a Grieving Co-Worker – Information for Work Teams

Goal: This tip sheet is designed to provide information to supervisors, managers and co-workers who are supporting a staff member through a period of mourning. The overall goal is to guide and educate co-workers and managers in understanding the grief process and to promote meaningful social support and group cohesion. In supporting a grieving co-worker, it is important to acknowledge the grieving process as well as demonstrate support for the individual.

Context: The loss of a family member or other loved one, friend or close colleague is one of life's most stressful events and a cause of significant emotional distress. Bereavement following the death of a loved one is a physical and emotional reaction marked by deep and intense sorrow.

Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. There are, however, typical stages that people experience as he/she moves through the grieving process.

- **Shock and Denial.** Feelings of shock, disbelief, numbness or detachment are common. The bereaved may appear to be coping well because he/she has not fully accepted the loss.
- **Separation.** The reality of the separation begins to sink in. This period involves intense emotions that include anger, guilt, fear, sadness, yearning and sometimes even relief.
- **Depression.** The intense pain associated with the separation stage begins to subside, leaving in its place an ongoing ache and feeling of sadness and emptiness.
- **Acceptance.** People entering this phase are gradually coming to an acceptance of his/her loss, moving forward and letting go, establishing new routines and directions.

As a person mourns, he or she may also experience a number of physical reactions such as headaches, gastrointestinal distress, fatigue, memory and concentration impairment, and insomnia. Existing medical conditions may worsen. The emotional reactions are normal and healthy. With time, these reactions will become less frequent and intense.

Key Points:

1. Don't act as if nothing has happened. Acknowledge and affirm the feelings of your grieving colleague.
2. Remember that grief is a personal process; people will cope differently. What you may have experienced is not necessarily what your colleague is experiencing.
3. Don't offer false comfort with statements like "it could be worse" or "you will be stronger in time". Instead, take time to listen and understand how your colleague is feeling.
4. Honor the person's choices and be sensitive to their discomfort. Some people are very private and do not want to be the focus of attention. Others find comfort in talking about their loss.
5. It is okay to mix grief with normality.
6. Be patient. Grieving is a long, individual process.
7. As a supervisor, you should be alert to signs that the grieving staff member is having increasing difficulty coping. Speak to your Human Resources Partner if you are concerned about how your staff member is coping, or if their grief is significantly interfering with their ability to function at work.
8. Encourage the grieving staff member to access individualized services through the EFAP, a support group or their church as appropriate. As a supervisor, you should be prepared to refer the staff member for assistance if warranted.
9. As a supervisor, you should also be alert to the impact the loss is having on other members of the work team. Particularly where the circumstances are sudden or traumatic, and where colleagues have a close and supportive relationship, the work team may also benefit from a discussion with a professional to help the team process their emotional reactions and better support their colleague. Contact Organizational Health and Effectiveness, EFAP Administrator for more information.