

# CoWorkers Facing Grief Together

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Grief is a natural part of life. Whether it's expected or sudden, we will all face loss at some point. It's common to experience grief in our workplace as well as our personal lives. Everyone will deal with the loss of a coworker differently. Some coworkers become like family to us, while others we may not know very well. Regardless of the reaction, there are ways to grieve together and process the loss without disrupting work functions.

## What is Workplace Grief?

Grief is our reaction to a loss of any kind. Typically, there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Everyone reacts differently, and there is no timetable for grief. If left unprocessed, grief may lead to problems with anxiety or depression.

There are several types of loss within the workplace. Death, retirement, unemployment, personal injury, and transitioning to a different position or location are all examples of a workplace loss. When facing the death of a coworker, there can be additional variables that influence the reaction, such as the age of the deceased, how long they worked there, whether it was sudden, and the nature of the relationships they had within the workplace.

The information about educational or therapeutic approaches is provided for educational purposes only. Certain treatments may or may not be covered through your benefit plan. Coverage typically depends on your plan specifications and relevant guidelines maintained in relation to your benefit plan.

## Struggling with Grief

Coworkers who are struggling with grief typically display some of the following symptoms:

- **Physical** - changes in appetite and sleep, headaches, stomach pain, lack of concentration, fatigue, restlessness, and drug or alcohol use.
- **Emotional** - sadness, fear, anxiety, lack of trust, irritability, depression, guilt, and lowered confidence.
- **Vocational** - low morale, anger (usually directed at their employer), lowered interest or motivation, or a desire to quit the job.

Occasionally, an employer may offer flexibility with work hours for a grieving employee. This may prove helpful, but it's important to recognize that some people find the daily work routine to be a necessary distraction or aid in the healing process.

## Handling the Death of a Coworker

Grief is a universal response, but no two people will handle loss exactly the same. The following tips may



help you work through your pain and give the permission needed to grieve:

- **1. Respect the relationships** - You might have been closer to the deceased coworker than others in the workplace, or vice versa. Everyone's relationship to the deceased will be different. While it is acceptable to ask a grieving coworker how they're doing, you should refrain from trying to "fix" them in their difficult time. Understanding these dynamics will help everyone along the grieving process. It is never helpful to tell someone to "get over it" or "snap out of it."
- **2. Talk about it** - Feel free to talk about how the loss is affecting you, even if your management is not formally addressing it. Don't be afraid or nervous to share with coworkers how you are feeling. Listen to their experience as well, as it can be mutually beneficial.
- **3. Give back** - Ask your employer about ways to formally and informally grieve together. Consider ways to support the coworker's family and honor his or her life. Some ideas might include planting a tree, hosting a fundraiser, establishing a college fund for any children involved, or finding other ways to give back to the community. Perhaps you can hold a workplace memorial service for your coworker. Talk about their strengths and weaknesses, share funny stories, and celebrate their

life. Laughter and tears are both part of the grieving process.

- **4. Use resources** - Many workplaces have employee assistance programs to offer grief counseling, either with an individual or a group. If not, they might connect you and other coworkers to various support groups and resources within your community.
- **5. Permission** - Sometimes we don't know why one death hits home more than another. Give yourself permission to grieve, even if you didn't know the person very well. You may experience increased fatigue or feel distracted on the job; these are normal reactions to grief. Talk with your employer if you are having difficulty adjusting back to your work routine.

After a significant loss in the workplace, it's important to take care of yourself. Be mindful to get the proper amount of sleep, seek out the support you need, and practice stress-reducing activities. Often times helping another through his or her own struggle can provide peace during yours.

No one should determine what is "grief-worthy" for another. If you or a coworker feels stuck in a grieving cycle, consider talking with someone in your human resources department, your doctor, a religious leader, or a mental health professional.