

Tip Sheet: When a Co-Worker Dies

People who work together are like extended families, and when a person dies, friends and co-workers grieve. When the death is unexpected, it can be particularly traumatic.

The Grieving Process

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to manifest and evolve. People do not heal on a timetable, but over time the emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. Experts describe the feelings, symptoms and outcomes of grief in various ways.

Broadly speaking, the feelings and symptoms of grief may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and concentration difficulties.

Most of the time a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, though perhaps in different degrees. Eventually, each phase is completed and the person moves ahead. The extent, depth, and duration of the process will also depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death and their own situation. Some outcomes of grief may include finding a new balance (which does not necessarily mean that things will be the same) and growth (readiness to move ahead with one's life).

Take Time to Grieve

You and your co-workers will need time to grieve. Some things to do:

- Create a memorial board. A photo, card, or special item the person kept on his/her desk can be a way to remember.
- Hold or participate in a fundraiser for a special cause or for the family of the deceased.
- Create a book of memories to give to the family. Many people are not aware of the work life of people they love. These will be unique memories for the family and a way for you to privately express feelings and memories.
- Conduct a workplace-only event. A luncheon or office-only memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.
- Attend the funeral or memorial service.

People experience grief differently. You or a co-worker who was particularly close to a person who died may feel depressed, absentminded, short-tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings. Creating healthy memories is part of healing. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or cope differently. A death also generates questions and fears about our own mortality. If a co-worker dies, you may feel guilty or angry at the person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life. These are normal emotions.

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Be aware of how you react to a deceased co-worker's replacement. Your anger or disappointment at his/her performance, personality or work style may be less a function of the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing.

Get help from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if you have trouble coping with the loss of your co-worker or if you find that your work is suffering. A decrease in your performance could be a signal that this loss is affecting you more profoundly than you thought.