

Loss | *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, as from violence or an accident, it can be particularly traumatic.

The Grieving Process

Grieving is a process that can take weeks, months, and even years. People don't heal on a timetable. The brief time given to attend the funeral only starts the process of healing. Experts describe the stages of grief in various ways, but broadly speaking they include:

Shock, Denial, Disbelief: It is possible to feel stunned and unable to accept the situation.

Anger: Feelings of powerlessness over the situation, being unable to change the outcome for the deceased, possibly feeling angry at being in a position of feeling such intense emotions.

Depression: Generalized feelings of sadness, loss of interest in usual activities, difficulty concentrating at work, tearfulness, or social isolation may occur. A need to talk about feelings may develop as well.

Bargaining: After the death of a close associate we may find ourselves thinking about our own mortality. We may find ourselves looking at what we could change so as to prevent a similar outcome for ourselves; we may wonder about what we could have done differently to have changed the outcome for our deceased associate.

Acceptance: The final stage occurs naturally after a working through of the feelings evoked during the prior stages of the loss. A sense of peace and resolution characterizes this stage, a sense of being able to go on and enjoy life.

Some people experience the grieving process in this order. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. 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 experiences of loss or trauma.

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Take time to grieve

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

Create a memorial board. A photo, card, or special item the person kept on his/her desk, or at the workplace, can be a way to remember.

Hold or participate in a fund-raiser 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.

What to expect:

People experience grief differently. You - or a co-worker who was particularly close to a person who died - may feel depressed, absent-minded, short tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.

Creating healthy memories is a part of healing. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief and ultimately heal. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or cope differently.

A death 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.

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

Get help if you have trouble coping with the loss of your co-worker or if you find that your work is suffering. A lag in your performance could be a signal that this loss is affecting you more profoundly than you think.

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