

Grief and Loss

Leaders guide to grief and loss in the workplace

Whether expected or not, the death of an employee will impact the workplace. It is important for leadership to respond compassionately and effectively, in order to keep the workplace functioning, to maintain a positive image of the organization, and to lead your team through this difficult time. It can be helpful to know what kind of reactions you might expect from employees, and what you can do to be helpful for them.

Common reactions

- › Shock and disbelief - people may feel like “this can’t be true” or feels “unreal.”
- › Range of responses - may be anything from emotional outbursts or crying, to no visible reaction at all; there is no single “right” way to grieve. Each response is as unique as a fingerprint.
- › Anger and blaming - this may be directed at leadership. Listen, but don’t take it personally.
- › Poor concentration and decreased productivity for a time - people will want to talk about what happened, so try to be flexible and allow them time to do so. Certain sensitive tasks may need to be temporarily reassigned.
- › People may feel unsafe, thinking “if it could happen to my coworker, it could happen to me.”
- › Withdrawing or isolating from others.
- › Irritability - may be quicker to anger or become annoyed. Be cautious in customer-facing activities.
- › Guilt over unfinished business - you may hear statements such as, “I wish I had told him/her...” or “I regret the last words we had were...”

- › Changes in level of activity - may be fidgety and moving around more than usual, or lethargic.
- › Physical complaints - such as headache, upset stomach, muscle tension, difficulties eating and/or sleeping.

Tips for supporting employees

- › Update employees periodically if new information arises. This will reduce rumors and position leadership as a reliable source of information.
- › Acknowledge the impact of what happened, and that you know it will likely influence the employees and their work for a time.
- › Provide a quiet and private space for employees to mourn.
- › Select a volunteer to be the liaison between the employer and the deceased’s family, usually a coworker who was close to the deceased. This will prevent the family from being bombarded with calls.
- › Identify potential needs and ways employees can be supportive.
- › Be visible and check in with employees periodically. Ask how they are doing and listen to them, offering a compassionate response.
- › Have an “open door.” Allow employees to come and talk or vent to you if they wish.
- › Coordinate with HR regarding employee attendance at funeral or memorial service.
- › Consider conducting some kind of tribute to the deceased employee, like a memory book to give to the family. This is an optional way to share memories of their coworker.

What to avoid

- › Don't minimize what happened or employees' reactions - such as "this is just a part of life" or "they're in a better place now."
- › Don't use religious references to death or dying.
- › Don't make employees talk about how they are feeling. If needed, an avenue for sharing their reactions should be made available, but not required.

Take care of yourself

The death of an employee impacts those in leadership as well. Not only did you lose an employee and someone you cared about, but you have the additional responsibility of keeping the workplace going. In stressful situations like this it is important to take care of yourself, and to allow yourself to grieve the loss as well. Here are some suggestions.

- › Eat healthy and drink lots of water. Your body and mind need the nutrients to recover from stress and expel the stress chemicals.
- › Engage in regular exercise. This helps to boost chemicals that improve mood, reduce stress, and improve sleep.
- › Try to maintain your usual sleep routine. If having trouble sleeping, get up and do a relaxing activity for a little while to distract your mind from worries.
- › Help someone else. Be a support to your coworkers; donate or volunteer at a charity; offer help to the deceased's family, such as offering a meal or providing child-care.
- › Do some things you enjoy. Part of taking care of yourself is making time to relax and have fun; this gives you a break from grieving and helps to maintain balance.
- › Talk to someone; family, friends, coworkers, a counselor, faith mentor, or anyone else with whom you feel comfortable sharing your feelings and is helpful to you. Maintain your normal routine. This may help you regain your sense of control and predictability of life.
- › Think about other times when you have coped with difficult situations. What positive coping strategies worked for you then? Can you practice those now?

When to seek professional assistance

If you or your team:

- › Are unable to care for yourself or dependents.
- › Experience significant impairment in your ability to function at work or in your personal life.
- › Feel intense sadness or depression for more than two weeks.
- › Have increased use of drugs or alcohol.
- › Have thoughts of harming yourself or others.



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