



GRIEF AT WORK:

A Guide for Supervisors

When serious illness or death enters the workplace, the supervisor's challenge is to **balance the human needs with those of the organization**. This guide gives you specific suggestions and resources for these situations:

- Dealing with a seriously ill employee
- When an employee suffers a loss
- When an employee dies

Use this guide as you blend actions and caring into the culture of your team. Remember, the example that the manager sets in these difficult situations reflects the sensitivity and caring of the entire company.

When an Employee is Seriously Ill

Respect the sick person's privacy.

Discuss with the ill employee how much information they're comfortable sharing with their colleagues. Encourage some disclosure, as it allows for understanding and support.

Inform the employee of resources.

Educate the employee about workplace resources such as FMLA leaves and the *Employee Assistance Program*. Community resources can also be shared such as hospice, support groups and educational websites.

Keep the work place functioning.

It's important to monitor the effects of the employee's illness on productivity. Are continued absences causing the work to suffer? Are co-workers stressed from covering? Taking early action is critical and can prevent future problems, but any actions need to be within the company employment policies. Your manager and Human Resources will be important allies in these situations. Some steps to consider:

- Acknowledge extra efforts by co-workers.
- Bring in additional staff if possible.
- Redistribute work or project priorities.

Keep in contact with an absent employee.

Staying connected with the seriously ill or dying employee is vital. Supervisors and staff need to maintain connections while balancing the desire for privacy. Consider cards, letters, food deliveries and visits.



When an Employee Suffers a Loss

While the typical work policy may allow up to three days off—or longer if the death is a spouse or a child, the effects and impact of the loss do not end after this time. As a supervisor, you'll need to manage the immediate situation and the long-term effect on your employee and team.

- **Respect the employee's privacy.**

Ask the employee what information they would like shared with other staff members. Keep all other information confidential.

- **Set an example.**

It's easy to shy away from a person who is suffering, for fear of saying the *wrong thing*. As the supervisor, you can set an example by reaching out to the person by sending a personal note or sending flowers. Consider the recommendations provided in the Intermountain EAP guide, *How to Help Grieving Employees*.

- **Check in with the employee.**

When the employee returns, take time to sit down and ask what kind of support will be helpful as he or she returns to his or her duties. A grieving employee will not be fully functional, and performance may be below normal standards for weeks.

- **Offer resources.**

Offer the Intermountain EAP *Bereavement* materials that fit the situation. Counseling and grief support groups may be helpful after some time has passed. Intermountain EAP can help the employee with these services.

“When I returned to work after my mother died, I wasn't sure how it would feel.

When I got to the office, there was a small plant with a note from my team.

My manager met with me, and we talked about my current projects. She asked if there was anything she could do to help. These kindnesses really helped me get through the first day back at work.

—Anne

Remember, death is hard to discuss—but facing grief openly will help you and your staff survive difficult times, bringing a new level of caring and cohesiveness.

When an Employee Dies

Notify all staff right away.

When the death of a team member occurs, whether it's unexpected or has been anticipated, it's important to notify all team members, at work or at home, and let them know of the event as soon as possible. This unites the team and sends a message that each individual is valued. It also begins the team support process.

Designate a liaison with the family of the employee.

It's helpful to identify a liaison from the workplace who will be in contact with the family. Rather than the family receiving many phone calls, the liaison can pass information on to the respective groups. Be sure to coordinate with Human Resources.

Respect the family's privacy.

Ask the family what information they would want shared with co-workers. Sometimes the family may not want to share details of the death and it is important to honor their wishes. In these situations, the supervisor may have to discourage rumors and speculation.



Give your employees an opportunity to grieve

Help your employees channel their immediate and ongoing grief. Here are some things employees can do:

- **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 staff to privately express their feelings and memories.
- **Order a flower bouquet that can be displayed in the workplace.** It can include a banner with the name and picture of employee.
- **Create a memorial board** where employees can jot a note about the employee, their contributions and how they will be missed.
- **Allow for employee gatherings where employees can express their grief and loss.** These meetings can be facilitated by an Employee Assistance counselor.
- **Sponsor a scholarship** on behalf of the employee or a special college fund for children of the deceased.
- **Arrange for all employees to attend the funeral who may want to attend.** Sometimes coworkers who choose not to attend will cover for others.
- **Listen to employees** as they offer ideas and suggestions that will be especially helpful for them in their grieving process.



“When Gary died, our workgroup experienced a range of emotions. Some team members wanted to talk about his death, while others were more quiet about it.

The day after Gary’s funeral, we got together at lunch to talk about our memories and ended up making a memory book in his honor. Each person wrote his or her thoughts and favorite memories on paper. We put them all in a book and gave it to Gary’s family. I think it helped his family see another dimension of his life—and understand more about his contributions at work.

-Taylor

The death and loss of the employee may affect employee productivity and motivation.

Each person deals with death in his or her own way. Some may act listless and unable to do their work. Others may be prone to crying, feeling sad or depressed. Others may appear angry or resentful. All of these reactions are normal, and the supervisor needs to allow for some loss of productivity, motivation and mistakes, especially from people close to the deceased. Through time, these behaviors generally decrease and a new equilibrium is found in the workplace. **If there is not improvement, call the EAP for some consultation.**

Pay attention to the reactions of coworkers when a replacement is hired.

The new employee may face a lack of cooperation, anger and even resentment. This doesn’t have anything to do with the new employee—it has a lot to do with the ongoing grief of staff. Acknowledging this situation openly can relieve some of the tension of the situation.

Be patient with the time it takes to grieve.

Grief does not have a time limit. Generally, employees will regain their productivity, but don’t be surprised when the grief becomes acute and there are dips. These times may come during traditional workplace celebrations or anniversaries. The grief and loss of the past also comes forward again if there’s another loss or tragedy on the team.

If you have any questions, please contact Intermountain EAP. We’re here to help.

For questions or to set up some consultation time, contact the Employee Assistance Program at **1.800.832.7733** or **eap@intermountainmail.org**
All contacts are free and completely confidential.

