

When a Co-worker Dies

"Grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on."
(American Hospice Foundation)

Hearing about the death of a co-worker can be a shocking and difficult experience to manage. Experiencing grief is a normal and natural response to loss -a universal human experience. Yet everyone experiences grief differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and no shortcut around grief.

- Multiple factors influence how we respond to death including our relationship to the deceased, cultural and religious beliefs, previous experiences with death, manner of death, individual mental health history, availability of support systems, and our life experiences. These factors can also impact how we express grief externally (mourn) and adjust to the loss internally.
- We may notice a range of emotional responses after a death including shock, denial, sadness, anger, guilt, confusion, numbness, or a lack of motivation.
- We can also experience physical symptoms such as a loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, headaches, body pain, muscle tension, restlessness, fatigue, and lack of motivation to exercise or engage in other activities.
- We may experience highly intense, time-limited (e.g., 20-30 minutes) distress, called "grief bursts", pangs, or waves. Sometimes these pangs come in reaction to reminders of the deceased such as on special holidays or anniversaries or seeing personal belongings. At other times, pangs may occur unexpectedly. Over time, many people experience symptoms less frequently, with briefer duration, and with less intensity.
- There is no timeline for the process of grief. If you feel your grief is overwhelming, getting in the way of managing daily tasks, persisting for a long time, or has left you questioning other relationships or your beliefs, it could be helpful to talk to a trusted colleague, friend, or an EAP Counselor.

Complicating Factors

- Experiencing a traumatic death including loss due to suicide or violence or multiple tragic losses can complicate our grief even further. Those who have a history of depression or anxiety may be at higher risk of experiencing complicated grief.
- Similarly, if a loss cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported, this may increase the risk of experiencing more complex grief. Examples include death by suicide, perinatal deaths, or a covert relationship with the deceased.
- Complicated grief can include difficulty accepting the death; intrusive memories; nightmares; yearning for the deceased; and withdrawing from social contact.



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Ways We Express Grief

- The outward expression of grief is called mourning. Some of your colleagues or co-workers may mourn outwardly with verbal or emotional expression while others process loss internally focusing on problem-solving and task completion.
- There is no right or wrong way to grieve and many will experience both an internal and external experience of grief. It's important to grieve in a way that is natural for you and avoid judgment about how you or others are grieving.
- Be supportive of each other as your team re-builds and copes following the loss of a colleague. Be available, if you can, to co-workers who need to talk. If you can't, gently mention that EAP is a resource they can engage for support.
- We all manage grief differently. It is important to keep this in mind when seeking to comfort others. What is often most helpful is listening and offering basic and applicable statements of empathy like, "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care", "this sounds hard", or "that sounds difficult".

Workplace Considerations

- If your team wishes to reach out to the family of the co-worker, follow appropriate workplace protocol. Typically, a human resources representative, your supervisor, or an appointed representative (identified by a supervisor) will coordinate any formal response to the co-worker's family. It is important to respect the family's privacy and wishes.
- Work with your supervisor to create a safe space for your work team to share memories and talk about the loss. Choosing to participate in these team gatherings should always be voluntary with participants sharing or not sharing at a level that feels comfortable to them.
- When listening to your co-worker's thoughts, feelings, and experience around their loss, know that you don't have to have the right words or answers. You can't take away the grief, but you and your team can hold a supportive space for each other.
- When seeking to comfort co-workers avoid religious statements or simple reassurances such as "they are in a better place" or "everything will be all right".
- Often it's helpful to do something in response to the news of the death. Be sure to work with your supervisor so you can ensure you are honoring the family's wishes. Examples of actions you might take are organizing a fund-raiser to help the family; making a donation to a cause which honors the deceased; creating a temporary or permanent memorial such as putting flowers on the co-worker's desk, making a plaque, or planting a tree; participating in a volunteer activity such as a cancer walk; or having a potluck where co-worker's share memories and stories.

For additional grief support, reach out to EAP at 877-313-4455.

Sources:

[American Counseling Association \(ACA\). 2011. Current trends in grief counseling.](#)
Association for Death Education and Counseling. 2013. Handbook of Thanatology.
[Hospice Foundation. ACAS. Managing bereavement in the workplace- a good practice guide.](#)
[PDQ@ Supportive and Palliative Care Editorial Board. 2020. Grief, Bereavement, and Coping with Loss.](#)



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