

# DEATH OF A COWORKER

In today's world, we often spend more time at work than we do at home. Our coworkers become mentors, friends and even "extended family." They are often present for important life events and may be close with our families. When we lose a coworker, we may be impacted in significant, and sometimes unexpected, ways.

## Feelings and reactions

Grief is expressed in very personal ways. The death of a coworker will affect each person differently. Reactions and feelings of grief can be shaped by a number of different factors.

**Relationship you shared.** It may have been strictly professional or have deepened to become a close friendship. As with family members, some work relationships may even become tense or difficult. The specifics of your relationship with the person will impact your experience of grief.

**Manner of death.** Your feelings and reactions may be stronger and harder to manage if the death was traumatic, such as an accident, suicide or violent death. A death that occurs at the workplace, that you witnessed, can be especially difficult. You may feel shock, anger, a sense of vulnerability, confusion, disbelief, or guilt, to name a few. If the death was due to natural causes, such as a heart attack or illness, you may react with some of the same feelings; however the intensity of your experience may be different. If your coworker was terminally ill over a long period, you may have been trying to cope with grief and a sense of helplessness for a long time.

**Role and connections at work.** They may have been a new employee or someone you did not know well. Or they may have been a long-term and well-liked employee who mentored and supported others.

Maybe they have family members at the company. Losing a coworker can be both a personal and professional loss. You must cope with their absence and establish a "new normal" in the workplace.

**Workplace environment.** If your workplace is a team environment, the loss of a key employee may have an impact on your job. The grief experience can be amplified if there have been other losses at your workplace in the past. On the other hand, if your workplace has never experienced a death before, the loss can hit especially hard. Some workplace cultures are uncomfortable with expressions of grief or emotion. Others tend to be more open to and supportive of expressing emotions.

## Understanding the emotions of grief

Grieving is a complex and challenging process with varying degrees of intensity. Your reactions can be overwhelming one moment and hardly noticeable the next. You may think you've "moved on" from the loss, when suddenly you experience strong emotions again. Grief is sometimes compared to the ebbing and flowing waves of the ocean. Sometimes they can crash over you, knock you off your feet and threaten to drown you or sweep you out to sea. Other times you feel them just gently lap at your feet.

There is no “normal” reaction to loss and no “right” way to grieve. Many different emotions may be felt as we come to terms with the loss and try to fold it into our everyday lives. Possible emotions include:

- > Shock is a common first reaction. It is often followed by denial or disbelief. This may be a way that our minds initially shield us from overwhelming emotions.
- > Sadness may be very intense and deep, especially if you were good friends.
- > Grief from other losses may be triggered.
- > Anxiety about how the workplace will function without the deceased, such as how the workload will be addressed.
- > Fears about your safety and security, depending on the cause of death.
- > Betrayal, mistrust, tension, or anger; feeling that the death is something that shouldn't have happened.
- > A need to return to a normal routine; a sense of urgency or expectation to “move on” from the loss.
- > Guilt or self-blame regarding an unpleasant last conversation, tension in the relationship or an inability to help them. Struggling with the “what ifs.”
- > Feeling vulnerable, aware of your own mortality.
- > Helplessness, particularly in cases of a long-term illness or witnessing a workplace accident.
- > Anger, a lack of patience, or being short-tempered.
- > Numbness or not being able to feel your emotions.
- > A lack of reaction or feelings of grief. This can happen if the relationship was strained, distant, or tense.

**Physical symptoms** of grief may also occur. Symptoms could include: headaches, insomnia, belly pain, or feeling tired or irritable. You may experience changes in appetite or increased drug or alcohol use. Restlessness, absentmindedness, and poor concentration are also common.

## Coping with grief

How can we cope with grief in the workplace, when tasks need to be completed and there may be no time for mourning?

**Avoid judging your own or others' reactions.** It is unhelpful in dealing with grief. Give yourself and coworkers permission to experience the emotions that come up, even if there is no emotion expressed. There is no “right” or “normal” way to feel when someone has passed away, and grief has no timeline.

**Memories** of the deceased are always present at work. It can help to have a way for everyone to share openly. Consider a bulletin board where people can post stories, memories, and pictures of the person.

**Be kind to yourself** and take a break if you become tearful or overwhelmed with emotion.

**Consider doing something for the deceased's family** as a team, if possible and permitted. This might be a donation to a charity, making a memory book or sending photos of the deceased that the family may not have. Pool together financial contributions to give gift cards for useful items, such as child care, meals, housecleaning, lawn service, etc.

**Self-care is vital** during times of stress. Make sure to eat well. Get regular exercise and the sleep you need to feel rested. It can help to express your emotions and talk about the experience with friends, family members, or a counselor. Calling your EAP can help you connect with supportive resources.

**Memorials or good-bye rituals** may be helpful. Attend the funeral or ceremony, if possible. You may wish to create a memorial to the person in the workplace, such as planting a tree in their honor or hanging a memorial plaque in the office.

The death of a coworker can be distressing and sad. It can be hard to focus on work while trying to deal with the loss. Remember, you are not alone in this. While everyone's reactions may be unique, you share this experience and can support one another through the grief. Over time, you will begin to move forward into your “new normal” in the workplace. Together you can grow into a new routine that honors your coworker's contributions, while helping you refocus on your job duties and goals.