

Coping with the Loss of a Co-Worker

When a co-worker dies, the loss can have a significant impact on those in the workplace. There is an element of "family" in many work groups; colleagues get to know one another as they work side by side and share work and personal experiences. Sometimes co-workers become close friends and spend time together outside of work. Others keep their relationship at work and develop a connection while working together.

The effects of the loss will be determined by many factors, including the length of time working together, the nature of the relationship, the age and health of the deceased, and the suddenness of the death.

The Grieving Process

Depending on the nature of your relationship with the deceased, you may or may not go through a grieving process. Bereavement is a natural and normal response to significant loss of any kind that allows us to process and heal. Understanding the grieving experience and how to cope effectively can help you in this process.

Stages of Bereavement

Within the first few weeks to months after a loss, you may experience a roller coaster of emotions. Individuals go through these stages in unpredictable waves -- moving through one stage to the next and sometimes shifting back and forth between stages. Some will experience certain stages but not others. Here are typical bereavement stages:

Shock and Disbelief -- the numbing and disorienting sense that the loss has not really happened. This stage can last from several hours to several days.

Anger -- at the deceased, yourself, and others, even your Higher Power for what has happened.

Guilt -- you may blame yourself for not doing more or for not dealing with any "unfinished business" that you had with your deceased co-worker.

Depression -- you may experience a deep sense of loss and be tearful at times. There may be a tendency to isolate. You may lose interest in activities and feel a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. Memories and feelings of other recent or past losses may surface.

Fear -- you may experience anxiety or panic, fears about the future. Your own sense of mortality may be reinforced as well as fear of losing other loved ones.

Acceptance -- eventually acceptance of the loss and personal growth will come, while you continue to honor the memory of your co-worker.

Bereaved individuals may experience physical reactions such as fatigue, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, feeling tense, aches and pains. Common psychological symptoms include inability to concentrate, impaired memory, irritability, disorientation, and confusion.

Ways to Cope with the Loss

Acknowledge the Loss

Allowing yourself and others permission to talk about what has happened is healthy. Ignoring the situation achieves nothing. It may be helpful to allow time at meetings to check in with others about how they are doing.

Acknowledge Individual Reactions

People are affected by loss in different ways. Some are deeply affected by the loss while others are not. Some may want to talk about their feelings while others want to deal with them privately. Some take longer than others to adjust to the loss. While many people find comfort in their religious or spiritual beliefs, others will not want to share their beliefs. People are affected by loss in different ways. Be aware and have respect for the different ways that people process loss.

Self Care

Indulging yourself with those things that nourish and replenish you - rest, relaxation, exercise, diversions - may be helpful. Grief is emotionally and physically exhausting. Express your thoughts and feelings to those with whom you feel safe. Some people derive benefits from writing as a means of expressing their grief.

Give Yourself and Others Time

Our society often minimizes the impact of loss and expects us to "get over" our loss in short order. We often ignore anniversaries associated with loss. Allow for time for individuals to process the loss. Memories of other losses may surface, recreating past pain and suffering, so be patient.

Funeral and Memorial Events

Attending such events can assist in the healing process. If the events are not local, perhaps there are other means by which to memorialize the loss. If attending such events is too distressful, don't go. Find other ways to offer your respect.

Honor the Deceased

Consider honoring the person in appropriate ways, for example, creating a memorial book or bulletin board, sending a letter or card to the family. Constructive actions such as donating blood or getting involved in volunteer organizations can also be helpful.

Use Your Resources

You or your loved ones may need professional help in navigating the bereavement process. Your Employee Assistance Program is a free and confidential resource available to you during this time.

Make the Call!

1-800-EAP-4-YOU

(1-800-327-4968)

TTY: 1-877-492-7341

www.EAP4YOU.com

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Stages of Grief

Shock/Denial - After a loss, you may feel numbness and disbelief. You may even experience physical reactions such as feeling faint or nauseous.

To help yourself surround yourself with friends and family for support.

Guilt - You may feel guilty about things you've said or done in the past.

To help yourself, recognize it as a normal phase of grieving but try to put it behind you. Focus on the positive aspects of the relationship you had.



Anger - You may feel abandoned because someone you loved died and you feel like you're left to resolve his or her problems.

To help yourself, express negative emotions. This will help you work through your feelings.

Depression -

You may feel lonely and sad.

To help yourself, realize that experiencing a certain amount of depression is healthy. Feeling depressed is one of the first signs that you've begun the healing process.

Everyone experiences grief in his or her own way. The pain that you feel is normal. It is important to remember these reactions are normal, defense mechanisms to protect you from a loss that is too big to take in all at once. They may occur in any order and you may revisit each stage more than once before grieving is over. Remember, you can call the EAP for more information and help in coping with grief.

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