

Coping *with* Loss

When someone in the workplace dies

People spend a good part of their daily lives together at work. When a co-worker dies, the loss can be felt deeply.

Grieving is painful and can take weeks, months and even years to run its course. The length of time spent grieving depends on the relationship you had with your co-worker and how he or she died. When a death is unexpected or violent, grieving may take even longer. There is no “right way” to grieve. For example, some people may want to talk about the loss while others do not.

Common reactions to grief

After loss, people usually react in the ways listed below. However, these reactions aren’t often felt in a “straight line” and to the same degree.

Shock: When a co-worker dies suddenly, shock is often the first response. It may seem like you don’t “feel anything” or you’re going through the motions at work without being fully present.

Denial: You may feel like the situation is hard to believe or deny that your co-worker has died. It is natural to want to cushion the blow of a painful loss.

Guilt: “If only I had known” or “I should have done more” or “I wish I hadn’t said that” are all feelings of regret or guilt that may haunt you during grief. Most people experience these nagging voices; this guilt will pass.

Anger: You may suddenly feel angry. It is a normal reaction to death, and it can be felt toward anyone or anything. You could find yourself angry with God, with your co-worker’s family or with yourself, your boss, or your fellow co-workers. You may even feel angry at the person who has died and feel guilty about it. Understanding where the anger is coming from makes it both easier to deal with and more likely to pass in time.

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Sadness: Sadness and tears are an important part of grieving. It is normal to feel pain, loneliness or sadness over loss. Losing a co-worker may also trigger feelings about previous losses. This is also normal.

Acceptance and growth: Eventually, grieving brings acceptance and the opportunity to grow. Many people seek meaning in their loss and may channel their energy to special causes that help others. Acceptance never means forgetting; it means moving forward with special memories.

Grieving and healing together

Even though you feel grief in your own unique way, grieving with others can be very helpful. Below are some ideas how you and your co-workers can take time to grieve.

- Consider going to the funeral or memorial service. By doing so, you can show support for the family and friends of the co-worker you lost. However, if you feel that this is too much of an emotional burden for you, do not feel obligated to go. You can show your support in other ways after you feel more emotionally prepared to do so.
- Help organize a workplace memorial. You and your co-workers can share memories and support each other during this tough time.
- Create a “Memory Book.” Invite employees to share their feelings and memories about your co-worker in a book. The book can be given to the family in memory of their loved one.
- Make a donation. Giving in your co-worker’s name is a meaningful way to honor his or her life and service to others.
- Create a space for grief. In their grief, people often leave flowers, notes or special items in a special place. At work, this could be the person’s desk or office, or a bulletin board nearby.

If your loss is very painful, you may want to seek help. A counselor can offer support and give you the chance to openly share your grief.

Need help?

Call toll-free, 24 hours a day, seven days a week: 1-800-227-1060

TTY users call 711.

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