

When a Colleague Is Grieving

Tragic, depressing and sad events impact everyone's life at one time or another. When misfortune impacts the life of a colleague or someone you supervise, you may not know the appropriate way to react. Should you offer assistance or provide a space and time to grieve? There is no right answer for every person and situation, but the following suggestions can help you determine an appropriate course of action for acknowledging a colleague's grief and offering your support.

Consider the Cause of the Grief

The first factor to consider is the cause. For example, the death of a loved one is always a cause of grief. However, the degree of sadness can vary depending on the relationship and closeness of the people involved. If a colleague's spouse or parent has died, the grief will probably be much greater than if it was a great aunt. But perhaps the colleague was raised by the great aunt or had a close relationship with her; understanding the nature of the relationship will help you determine an appropriate way to acknowledge and respond to grief.

Consider Where Your Colleague Is in the Grieving Process

There are five commonly accepted stages to grief. Determining where your colleague is in this continuum can help you fashion your response.

The five stages of grieving are:

Shock: Shock is the first, most immediate reaction to a traumatic event for many people. They often say they do not believe what has happened.

Anger: It is common for many people to experience feelings of rage and anger after a traumatic event. They may have a short temper and be prone to angry outbursts fueled by their emotions.

Bargaining: People often try to change or bargain with the situation that has caused them grief. They think that if they change something or promise to act differently, the situation that is causing their grief will change or become better. This is an attempt to rationalize a solution for situations that are not fixable.

Depression: Depression and apathy are feelings encountered throughout the grieving process. Many people may feel for a time that previously important things and actions are now meaningless.

Acceptance: Acceptance is the stage of grieving in which things seem to return to normal. The bereaved accept their situation, know that they cannot change it, and understand that they have to move on with their life and the new circumstance in which they are living.

A person in the shock or anger stage of grieving may not feel up to having a lengthy conversation with you because it is still too early in the grieving process, so offering a few brief words of support may be a better approach. Likewise, somebody in the depression or acceptance stage of grieving might be more willing or eager to talk, so offering only a few words of support or encouragement would probably be the wrong way to acknowledge or aid bereavement.

Consider the Nature of Your Relationship

The nature of your relationship with a colleague is a factor in how you acknowledge grief and bereavement. The amount and type of sympathy and support you would show someone you are very friendly with will differ greatly from what you would show with only a passing workplace acquaintance.

Perhaps you are very close with the colleague. You have had lunch together several times each month and talk considerably about things beyond the workplace. You will probably take a more in-depth approach to acknowledging his or her grief than you would for a colleague you may know in passing but with whom you have never really had any other interaction.

You may tell a close colleague to call you at home if he or she is feeling depressed, or offer to run an errand for her. You can offer more casual workplace acquaintances some simple words of acknowledgement, support and understanding. The extent of your kindness varies in degrees, but your words and actions of support in each case will be appreciated by the bereaved.

[Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.](#)

Consult Other Colleagues

Talking with other colleagues about how to respond to the grief a fellow colleague is often a positive experience. Other people in your workplace may have ideas on ways to aid, support and comfort the bereaved. Working together can also help eliminate any duplication of effort.

Many people choose to express their sympathy through group offerings of condolences or assistance. You and your colleagues might also work together to pick up the slack for someone who is going through a difficult time.

Offer Support

The eventual outcome of this process is an understanding of the situation your colleague is experiencing, culminating in an appropriate show of support for the individual and his or her family. Support can take many forms, such as:

- Simple spoken or written words of understanding and encouragement
- Maintaining your normal level of communication (do not shy away from close colleagues or become suddenly overly attentive to a casual acquaintance)
- Understanding a grieving person may not be capable of doing his or her best work at that moment
- Including the colleague in social events and plans
- Respecting their need for privacy or alone time
- Just being there for those who need someone to talk with
- Suggesting the Employee Assistance Program for services if he or she needs to talk with a professional therapist or grief counselor.

There is no timetable for how long grieving will last. All people experience, internalize and cope with tragic events in their own way and on their own schedule. But by providing an appropriate and caring show of support and empathy, you can greatly help grieving colleagues as they adapt to their new physical or emotional circumstances.

Resources

- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org
- The Compassionate Friends: www.compassionatefriends.org
- National Organization for Victim Assistance: www.trynova.org
- American Trauma Society: www.amtrauma.org

How to Listen to a Colleague Who is Suffering

Whenever people face mental health issues resulting from loss of a loved one, trauma, or any other reason, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us try to avoid listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

What Typically Happens

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals, such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professionals can help in special ways and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us are not able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

What to Do

Though each situation is unique, the most important thing to do is simply be there and listen and show you care.

- Keep your comments brief and simple so you do not get the person off track.
- Ask questions which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking. For example, "What happened next?" or "What was that like?"
- If possible, give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Do not hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate.
- Let people know that it is OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It is also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.

What Not to Do

Do not be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response while another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later.

Emotions are rarely simple. People who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.

It is natural to worry about saying the wrong thing. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation. Use this to guide you:

- Do not offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Do not turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different.
- Do not say anything which tries to minimize the person's pain such as, "You shouldn't take it so hard" or "It could be a lot worse."
- Do not say anything which asks the person to disguise or reject his or her feelings such as, "You have to pull yourself together."

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Learn the 5 Signs of Suffering

Nearly one in every five people, or 42.5 million American adults, has a diagnosable mental health condition, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Often our friends, co-workers, neighbors and family members are suffering emotionally and don't recognize the symptoms or won't ask for help. And sometimes we're the ones who are suffering and won't admit it.

Here are five signs that may mean you or someone you know might need help:

Their personality changes.

You may notice sudden or gradual changes in behavior. That can be acting in ways that don't seem to fit the person's values, or the person may just seem different.

They seem uncharacteristically angry, anxious, agitated or moody.

You may notice more frequent problems controlling their temper or that they seem irritable or unable to calm down. People in more extreme situations of this kind may be unable to sleep or may explode in anger at a minor problem.

They withdraw or isolate themselves from other people.

Someone who used to be socially engaged may pull away from family and friends and stop taking part in activities he or she used to enjoy. In more severe cases, the person may start failing to make it to work or school. Unlike someone who is naturally introverted, this sign is marked by a change in typical sociability, as when someone pulls away from the social support he or she typically enjoys.

They stop taking care of themselves and may engage in risky behavior.

You may notice a change in the level of personal care or an act of poor judgment on his or her part. For instance, someone may let his or her hygiene deteriorate, or the person may start abusing alcohol or illicit substances or engage in other self-destructive behaviors that alienate loved ones.

They seem overcome with hopelessness and overwhelmed by their circumstances.

Have you noticed someone who used to be optimistic and now can't find anything to be hopeful about? That person may be suffering from extreme or prolonged grief, or feelings of worthlessness or guilt. People in this situation may say that the world would be better off without them, suggesting suicidal thinking.

If you recognize that someone is suffering, what should you do?

The answer is simple: reach out, connect, try to inspire hope and, above all, offer help. Show compassion and caring and a willingness to find a solution when the person may not have the will or drive to help himself or herself. It may take more than one offer, and you may need to reach out to others who share your concern about the person who is suffering.

You can help change the conversation about mental health issues and stigma associated with it by learning the 5 signs. And if you or any member of your household needs help, your employee assistance program is designed to provide short-term counseling services, work-life assistance, and other guidance to help you and your family handle concerns constructively before they become major issues.

You don't need to face your problems alone.

Resources

- The above information was provided by the Campaign to Change Direction, a collection of groups joined together in a national campaign to raise awareness of and provide education about mental health issues. You can learn more at www.changedirection.org.

Grieving for Co-Workers

People spend many hours of their lives with co-workers, and a co-worker's death can be as devastating as losing a loved one. This is both a personal and professional loss for a business.

Employees

A co-worker's death can be devastating for surviving employees. Everyone grieves differently; some co-workers may want to discuss the issue, while others may want to grieve privately. There are several ways employees can try to cope with their grief:

- Be attentive for co-workers who are having a difficult time.
- Be compassionate to fellow co-workers who may be experiencing a decline in productivity.
- If there is a new hire who is occupying the job of the departed employee, accept and welcome this person.

Grief is a natural process that requires time. If, even days or weeks later, an employee has difficulty accepting a co-worker's death, consider consulting with a mental health professional such as a psychologist. The EAP can also help with suggestions and therapy sessions.

Remembering the Employee

With attendance at funeral and memorial services limited, employees may wish to have another way to remember their co-worker. Some ways to do this include:

- Hold a separate memorial service via remote access such as Zoom or other web platforms.
- Create a memorial board where co-workers can post messages or memories.
- Create a memory book for the family.
- Remember the person at virtual staff meetings or annual events.
- If possible, hold or join a fundraiser for a special cause in memory of the deceased.
- Establish a scholarship or other fund in the name of the deceased.
- Plant a tree on the company grounds.
- Put up a plaque or memorial item to denote the service of the employee.

Resources

- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org
- AARP: www.aarp.org
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- National Funeral Directors Association: www.nfda.org

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