

GRIEF AND LOSS AT WORK: SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

COVID-19 has upended our lives in many ways, leaving us to cope with daily feelings of loss and grief. As difficult as this is, the challenge can become much greater if someone we know dies. The unexpected, intense impact of the death of an employee can bring deep feelings of grief. This can be a challenging time for you. As a manager, you will play a role in supporting coworkers and the workplace. Your company may have procedures and protocols that will be prioritized to help you do that. The following guidelines may offer additional help.

Communicating the news

- › Consult your company policy or seek guidance from your human resources or legal department to determine confidentiality and privacy policy guidelines related to disclosing health information. If company policy allows the news of the death to be shared, get clarity about how you can address common questions, such as what happened and how the team might be able to respond.
- › Share the news of a death with the team as soon as you are able. If employees are working remotely, consider the best way to deliver this news. It may be best to gather the team virtually.
- › Strive to be direct and empathetic. You might say: “It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that...” or “I have some information that is very difficult for me to relay. It is about...”
- › Give coworkers an opportunity to express themselves but don’t force anyone to share thoughts or feelings.
- › Listen and answer questions while protecting the privacy of the employee and family members, as guided by your policy and their wishes.
- › Think about what employees need to hear on an emotional level. It may be acknowledging that this loss impacts everyone and that you know it’s going to be hard for a while. It may be reassuring them that you’ll provide any news as soon as you can.

Prepare to go forward

- › If necessary, draft a workable plan to cover business needs impacted by the death.
- › Adjust your expectations. Review work needs from a triage perspective in the immediate aftermath. Make sure key needs are met, but try to be flexible about the rest. Understand that it may be hard for some to concentrate or, perhaps even to come to work. Be sure to communicate clearly what your expectations are and the timeline for flexibilities.
- › Be available and responsive to the needs of individual employees.
- › Make sure you take care of yourself as well. Managers often feel that to be professional they must be unaffected. This isn’t realistic or healthy. Sharing your honest emotions while role-modeling healthy coping gives employees a blueprint. If you are heavily impacted by the death, try to work through your most intense feelings before interacting with employees. Seek support from your colleagues.

Be aware

- › There is no right or wrong way to respond to the death. Some people mourn publicly, others privately. Some need to talk, others do not. Some might want to talk but be reluctant to come to you. Be sensitive and alert to pick up on what an individual employee may need.
- › Rituals, such as sending cards or flowers or organizing a memorial, give people a way to respond to the helplessness of loss. A ritual can provide a framework for expressing thoughts and feelings. Talk with your human resources department to understand any policies regarding privacy and communications that would impact your choices. Respect any individual's decision to not participate in a ritual.
- › The loss of a coworker can escalate feelings of anxiety about the risk of COVID-19 and one's own health and safety. Know that this fear may be an added factor, making it more difficult for employees to stay focused at work.
- › Remember that reactions may vary widely. Don't make assumptions about what you're seeing. Some employees may be devastated, while others may be sympathetic, but less impacted and just want to get back to work.
- › Go the distance. Grieving can be a long process and support can fade. Try to continue to offer support for employees who need it. Keep in mind that the anniversary of the death, birthdays, holidays and other meaningful days may be especially hard.

Recognize that grief can play a role in all types of loss

Grief can be triggered in many ways. We may anticipate it with a death, but be less aware when the loss is harder to identify, such as the losses we may be experiencing in this pandemic.

These losses may include the loss of predictability, connections, daily norms and a sense of security and safety, among others.

We don't always recognize that these losses, like other, more tangible losses, can bring stress and intense emotions, including grief.

Grieving is a normal and natural process that offers a way to deal with the pain of loss. Knowing this is normal and feeling supported can help us work through these feelings.

Offering support

- › Talk together as a team about meaningful ways to support one another and honor the loss of your colleague. Be sure to stay within the guidelines provided by human resources/legal, and the wishes of the employee's family.
- › Allow the employees to talk about their feelings with you. The need to repeatedly discuss feelings is common and normal. It can be a helpful way to process. If you are working virtually, consider establishing a regular time each day that you will be available for calls. In addition, you may want to check in with each employee on a regular basis for a time.
- › Listening can be a powerful form of support. Being able to just listen, without giving advice, trying to make it better, or sharing your own experiences, allows the person to process in their own way and on their own timetable.

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