

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF AND ANXIETY

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Right now we are living with uncertainty in our daily lives and while at work. Often we find ourselves focusing on our worst fears of what could happen and the losses that we may face. This can have an emotional impact, especially if people around you become ill. Getting the news that a coworker has tested positive or is hospitalized for COVID-19, or is seriously ill or dying from the disease, can produce a wide range of intense reactions.

If a coworker tests positive for COVID-19

You may experience anxiety or fear that you have been exposed to the coronavirus. You may feel more vulnerable or at risk than you did before, especially if this is the first or only person you've known with the disease.

Emotional reactions can shift and change as updates come in regarding the condition of your coworker. You may feel shock, despair, sadness, anger, dread, worry, fearfulness, helplessness, numbness, denial or have trouble concentrating. You may also experience emotions from past losses.

You may feel particularly isolated in your emotions as individuals and workplaces observe stay-at-home orders or remote work arrangements. Without coworkers around you, you may feel that others are not as impacted by the situation as you are, or wonder if your reactions are out of the "norm" or "overreactions."

During this time there may be a desire to help, made more challenging with the changes to the workplace noted above. Talk with your coworkers and share ideas on how to support your colleague. Perhaps sending a virtual card, gift card, or setting up a video chat to check in may be appropriate. Make sure to talk to your manager to ensure that you are honoring the wishes of the ill colleague and their family.

If your coworker is seriously ill or dying

Grieving that happens before an actual loss has occurred is called "anticipatory grief." It's a common source of stress and tension as employees struggle with emotions that come with a potential loss. Facing this possibility, along with all the other challenges and losses presented by a pandemic, can compound anxiety and feelings of grief.

This state of waiting and wondering, without knowing what to expect can be stressful. This can be made worse by ongoing news stories about deaths from the virus and shortages of medical staff and supplies. It may help to manage this by obtaining regular updates on your coworker's condition from your manager.

Anticipating an outcome that includes the possibility of death, also reminds us of how fragile and vulnerable we all are. We are all facing this same risk. It forces us to consider the end of life in a real and concrete way. This can bring up powerful feelings and concerns.

Each coworker has his or her own history, experiences and attitudes when it comes to this type of situation. Reactions and emotions are affected by these factors, as well as by beliefs, support systems and the relationship with the seriously ill coworker. It is important to recognize and respect that everyone will have their own unique response.

Self-Care Tips

Remember, this situation is stressful for you as well. Be mindful of your own needs. Practicing good self-care can help you weather this difficult time.

- › Allow yourself to grieve; give yourself permission to feel all the emotions that this situation brings up; let yourself cry when you need to.
- › Turn to others for comfort and support. You may need to rely on virtual ways to connect – telephone calls, video chats, text messages, even emails can be a way to gain valuable support.
- › Remember the things you have control over instead of focusing on things beyond your control. Tackle small, solvable problems, one day at a time.
- › Try to make some time just for yourself. Do something you enjoy and find comforting, even if just for a few minutes. Look at photos of loved ones, friends, or colleagues; watch a funny video; read a chapter of a book. Take time to simply gaze out the window or sit in the sunshine.
- › Consider stress reduction techniques, such as deep breathing exercises or meditation. These can help you focus on the “here and now,” letting go of worry and uncertainty for a few moments.
- › Taking some type of action can reduce the feelings of helplessness you may be experiencing. Explore different actionable ideas that might help you and your team cope, as well as honor and support the ill individual. For virtual workplaces, consider an online discussion board or group chat to share memories, reactions, and support one another.
- › Prioritize your physical self-care. Get some type of regular exercise. Find videos online or go outside for a walk. Choose healthy foods to ensure your body is well-nourished and strong to get you through this time. Get enough sleep to feel rested.
- › Limit your exposure to news coverage, which can arouse emotion and increase fear. Check only once or twice per day at designated times. Turn off notifications to your phone.

Reach out for support

Sharing your thoughts and feelings with a mental health professional can help you put them in perspective. You can also gain strategies for managing your emotions or other concerns. You may want to reach out for professional support if you are struggling.

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