

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF AND ANXIETY

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Right now we are living with uncertainty in our daily lives and while at work. In this situation, the thoughts of what could happen can take over, drowning out facts and what we know today. Often we find ourselves focusing on our worst fears of what could happen and the losses that we may face. This can have an impact on the workplace. If an employee has tested positive or is hospitalized for COVID-19, or is seriously ill or dying from the disease, you may notice a wide range of intense reactions in your employees, or yourself.

If an employee tests positive for COVID-19

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

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

Employees may feel particularly isolated in their emotions as individuals and workplaces observe stay-at-home orders or remote work arrangements. Without coworkers around them, they may feel that others are not as impacted by the situation as they are, or wonder if their 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. You must be sure to learn and respect the wishes of your ill employee or family members regarding disclosing information. If permitted, talk with employees and share ideas on how to support their colleague.

If the employee 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. They may feel more able to manage this knowing you will provide consistent communication.

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 employee has their 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's important to recognize and respect that everyone will have their own unique response.

Helping employees cope

Below are some ways to support employees and help them cope with feelings of anticipatory anxiety or grief.

- › Acknowledge the feelings of your employees. Let them know that it's normal to feel grief or other emotions that this situation brings up. They may cry. You can allow that to happen. Listen for what they need.
 - › Remind them to turn to others for comfort and support. They 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.
 - › Pay attention to what you have control over. Your employees may be distressed and there may be nothing you can do to fix that. If possible, allow them to take time for themselves. Recognize that there will be some things that you cannot affect. Understand that you'll have to let those go.
 - › Be aware of what employees are working on. You may have to lower your expectations. Encourage employees to tackle small, solvable problems. Convey the idea that taking it one day at a time can be an effective strategy.
 - › 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.
 - › Keep your EAP resource in mind. There are webinars that address the challenges of COVID-19, such as "Living with Grief and Loss," that you can recommend to your employees. You can also consult with your Employee Assistance Consultant regarding resources you can provide to your employees on stress reduction and self-care.
- › You can remind employees of the importance of physical self-care, such as getting some type of regular exercise by finding videos online or going outside for a walk. Promote stress reduction techniques, such as deep breathing exercises or meditation. Encourage them to choose healthy foods to ensure nourishment and strength. Emphasize getting enough sleep to feel rested. Remind them to find time for relaxing activities.
 - › Advise them to limit exposure to news coverage, which can arouse emotion and increase fear.

The EAP can connect you and your employees with counselors and provide many other resources that can support you whenever you need it.

Services can be provided telephonically or virtually.

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