

When Your Coworker Dies

Helping Yourself in the Loss



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Work communities are the “families” with whom we spend much of our waking lives. Thrown together because of the need to complete some common tasks, the people with whom we work sometimes become our most trusted allies and friends. That is why when a coworker dies, we live through many of the same experiences of grief as we would with any loved family member.

How Grief Works

Grief is more than an emotion—it is a collision of every emotion a human can possibly feel, shaking us “from top to bottom.” Especially during the early weeks of grief, you may experience the gamut of human emotion. Anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, and fear are some of the common emotions of grief.

All these emotions and dozens of others are normal—but not everyone experiences all of the emotions. Grief is very personal so your experience will be somewhat unique from other people—both at work and at home.

While we often think of grief in emotional terms, it is also physical, social, mental, and spiritual. You may find yourself more fatigued than usual and dealing with sleep difficulties. Because people grieve differently from each other, we sometimes inadvertently expect our experiences to match those of other people. It rarely works that way.

Many people in grief report difficulty concentrating and “staying on task.” This blending of experiences is part of what makes it especially difficult when a trusted colleague dies—whether the death comes after a long illness or is completely unexpected.

For some people, the death of a work companion creates a need to reevaluate life’s purpose and priorities. You might wonder whether what you do is important and how exactly you are making an impact on the world in the job you do. In the next section, you will find some practical ideas for working through some of these struggles and questions.

If you are having trouble
“staying on task,”
know that’s normal in grief

What to Do Now

Deciding what to do now is often difficult in grief. When a family member dies, our workplace is often a place to which we can go as a “refuge” from the emotional pain and turmoil that is part of our personal lives. When work is a huge reminder of your loss, this escaping isn’t nearly so easy, so here are some ideas to try:

Practice making a “things to do” list every day.

Writing down your priority tasks to accomplish makes it much easier to stay true to the job you are being paid to do and helps alleviate those project surprises at the last minute.



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Join a support group.

In either the office with other colleagues who are working through the same death or in a community group that welcomes those who are reconciling grief after the death of a friend, you will find mutual group of friends who are all on the grief journey. You can check with human resources or your employee assistance program to find out what your employer is providing. You can also learn about grief support groups in our community by calling a hospice, hospital, church, temple, senior center, or our funeral home.

Reevaluate your life's mission and purpose.

Attend a seminar or read a book (such as Stephen Covey's First Things First) for more help on discovering or rediscovering what you are hoping to accomplish through your life. The grief period following the death of a colleague is a wonderful growth opportunity for this kind of introspection. Time management company DayTimers has excellent articles on time and life management on their website at www.daytimer.com.

Give yourself space and permission to grieve.

While you must continue to work even after a colleague dies, and even though some of your friends, family members, and other colleagues will suggest that "you get on with your life," it is important to give yourself some regular time to write, reflect on your relationship with the person who died, and remember your loss. Keeping a journal, visiting the cemetery or other special place, and long walks can be very useful in this process.

Create a memorial.

In addition to the scholarship funds, gifts to charity, and planting of trees that often follow an employee's death, you can also find creative ways to help yourself and other staff members remember his or her life. In cooperation with the Red Cross, one southern California police department held a community blood drive on the anniversary of a fellow-officer's line of duty death.

Don't be ashamed to ask for help.

Even though grief is normal and natural, you might still find help talking with a professional. Especially if you feel your sadness is becoming a full-blown depression or you are thinking about hurting yourself, talk to someone. Your clergy, family doctor, local mental health clinic, or the suicide prevention center are all excellent places to turn for help.



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