

WHEN A CO-WORKER DIES

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When a co-worker dies on the job, those closest to the worker are expected to experience strong emotions. But when mere acquaintances or those in similar roles in the organization are also affected, it is often a surprise to everyone involved. To continue to be productive without interfering moods, thoughts, and feelings, co-workers need to face the reality of the death and allow themselves time to deal with their reactions. Ignoring one's reactions can be destructive and have long-term effects.

What to Expect

There is no one set of feelings all co-workers may experience, nor any timetable as for when these feelings may occur. The type and intensity of the emotions experienced seem to depend on several factors, including: whether the disaster was natural or man-made; the degree of violence or horror associated with the death; whether conditions causing the death continue to threaten others; and the workers' grief resources.

Co-workers who have experienced the death of a colleague display a wide range of emotions. The death of a co-worker can lead to shock, anger, sadness, guilt, apathy, increased cravings for drugs and alcohol, cynicism, and a jungle of other emotions. When the person who dies is a close friend, the sense of loss is that much greater. There is a great longing to restore the relationship. Often, there is a strong urge to make sure that this kind of death does not happen to others. Those workers who did not know the deceased personally, but who share the same kind of job or work for the same company, tend to focus their thoughts on the shortness of life and its unpredictability. Any worker in the same organization may notice their pace or work is slower.

Showing Support

While it is not possible to take away the pain that a death causes, there are ways that a co-worker can offer helpful support.

- * Listen. Be available to those who want to talk about the death and listen with interest and concern. Do not pressure someone into talking about it.
- * Be there. Those closest to the worker who died may benefit from someone just sitting quietly with them as they experience the loss. For another worker, help may take the form of being cheerful and distracting. For others, it might mean helping them make plans about what to do next.
- * Laugh together. Build moments of enjoyment, even if they are brief.
- * Express your satisfaction. This is an ideal time for expressing pride and satisfaction in a colleague's performance. It is a time for praise.

HELPING YOUR EMPLOYEES

- As They Experience Grief -

Loss can have a profound impact on any employee. Death, illness, injury, divorce, relationship changes, and career disappointments can all lead to a grief experience. Grief is a normal response to emotional trauma.

The intensity of grief will vary according to several factors:

- The closeness of the relationship
- The type, timing, and extent of the loss
- The individual's coping skills
- The extent of the support available, provided, and utilized

The Stages of Grief Include:

- Denial
- Shock and Confusion
- Sadness and Tears
- Irritability and Arguments
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Aftershocks
- Acceptance
- Return to new normal

Note: These stages may not occur in any given order and may be repeated.

The Symptoms of Grief are Usually Experienced in Cycles

- Tearful, irritable, absent
- Preoccupation and lack of concentration
- Lack of decision-making ability; confusion
- Tense and nervous
- Eating and sleep disturbances
- Increase in compulsive behaviors such as alcohol consumption and drug use
- Lack of energy and motivation
- Depression

Be Supportive in Your Response to Grief and Loss

- Have empathy
- Maintain your relationship
- Encourage your employee to process the grief rather than fighting it
- Encourage utilization of support: peers, family, and Methodist EAP

Your Responsibilities as a Supervisor

- Focus on a reasonable work performance; depends on the intensity of the employee's grief
- In all situations, *Remind* your employees of their Methodist EAP benefits
- If work performance is unsatisfactory, *Recommend* he/she utilize their EAP benefits
- With unacceptable work performance, a *Supervisory Referral* is appropriate

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common and quite normal for people to experience aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event. Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear. The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last days, weeks, months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and support from your co-workers, family, and friends the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be helpful. This does not imply craziness or weakness, but it simply indicates that this particular event was just too painful to manage alone.

PHYSICAL

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Muscle tremors
- Twitches
- Difficulty breathing*
- Rapid breathing
- Elevated blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat
- Chest pain*
- Headaches
- Visual difficulties
- Nausea/Vomiting
- Thirst
- Hunger
- Dizziness
- Excessive sweating
- Chills
- Weakness
- Fainting

EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety
- Survivor guilt/Self blame
- Grief
- Denial
- Severe panic
- Fear of loss or going crazy
- Uncertainty
- Loss of emotional control
- Emotional numbness
- Depression
- Lack of enjoyment
- Apprehension
- Intense anger
- Irritability
- Agitation
- Helplessness
- Mistrust
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Apathy/Boredom

MENTAL

- Tendency to blame others
- Confusion
- Poor attention
- Inability to make decisions
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble identifying known objects or people
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- Poor problem solving
- Loss of a sense of time, place, or person
- Disturbed thinking
- Nightmares
- Inescapable images
- Experiencing flashbacks
- Suicidal ideas*
- Disbelief
- Change in values
- Search for meaning

BEHAVIORAL

- Changes in normal activities
- Change in speech
- Withdrawal from others
- Emotional outbursts
- Change in communication
- Suspiciousness
- Inability to rest
- Substance abuse
- Intensified startle reflex
- Antisocial acts
- Pacing
- Erratic movements
- Decreased personal hygiene
- Diminished sexual drive
- Appetite disturbance
- Prolonged silences
- Accident proneness

Best Care
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

In Omaha, call 354-8000
or 1-800-666-8606

* definite indication of the need for medical attention

COPING SUGGESTIONS FOLLOWING TRAUMA

- Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise, alternated with relaxation, will alleviate some of your physical reactions.
- Structure your time and keep busy.
- Remember you are not crazy - you are experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Talk to people - talking with supportive friends and family members is a healing medicine.
- Reach out - people do care.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of alcohol or other drugs. These can only further complicate your situation.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through the feelings.
- Do things you enjoy and remember to take care of yourself.
- Realize that those around you are also under stress.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a feeling of control over your life. For example, if someone asks you what you would like to eat - answer them even if you are not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Reoccurring thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals even if you don't feel much like eating.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY MEMBERS & FRIENDS

- Listen carefully.
- Be willing to just sit quietly with the person.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them - they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for the family.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them.

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