



Serious illness and death can shock us in a workplace. When a co-worker becomes seriously ill or even dies, your productivity and the dynamics of your workplace are affected. You may have spent many hours with the person, and consider her a friend, not just a co-worker. Illness and death touch peoples' feelings about their work and workplace, their own lives, and their fears about death and dying.

Dealing with illness and death can be difficult. What can you do if someone you work with is seriously ill, or dies?



IF SOMEONE IS SERIOUSLY ILL

Respect the sick person's desire for privacy.

How much or how little of a sick person's illness is disclosed is for the individual and his supervisor to decide. Rather than speculate, ask your supervisor if you have questions.

A co-worker who is ill may frequently be absent from work. You or others may have to fill in. You want to be a good person — but it's also OK to feel some resentment at the extra work **you** have to do.

Discuss the situation privately with your supervisor.

Your supervisor may not be aware of the level of effort others are undertaking to “cover” for the person who is ill.

Remember: anything that affects your performance has the potential to affect not only your work and career, but your supervisor's. Your boss can help you share the burden and possibly offer additional resources.

Note: The Americans with Disabilities Act and other employment laws address the steps a company may take with an employee who discloses an illness or who is ill. Before taking any specific personnel action your supervisor may want to check with a human resource specialist.

MAINTAINING OFFICE CONNECTIONS

A co-worker's serious illness reminds us of our own mortality. Sometimes we shy away from a sick person as though the condition were catching. Make sure the sick person is included in key meetings or invited to office social gatherings. He or she may decline, but the gesture is important.

KEEPING CONTACT WITH AN ABSENT CO-WORKER

For a seriously ill or dying person, the connection to work life can be vitally important. Sharing office business and staff news keeps the person from feeling isolated.

The difficulty is to maintain this connection while balancing the desire for privacy, and the effects of the disease on the sick person's energy.

Stay in touch.

Your presence in the person's life is more important than the specific steps you take. Some companies "pitch in" and offer shopping, visiting, or vacation time to co-workers who are ill.

Designate one person to be the office liaison, responsible for passing along information on how the sick person is doing, what he or she needs, and how much contact he or she feels up to.

Encourage your supervisor to call and/or visit.

Encourage cards, letters, or food deliveries that don't require the sick person to actively interact. An informal office video in which everyone says hello or gives their own messages can work wonders.

These activities not only maintain a connection with the sick person, but help office morale and create a sense of community in the face of a crisis.



WHEN A CO-WORKER DIES

People who work together are like extended families, and when a person dies, friends and co-workers grieve. When the death is unexpected, as from violence or an accident, it can be particularly traumatic.

THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to manifest and evolve. People don't heal on a timetable, but over time the emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. Experts describe the feelings, symptoms and outcomes of grief in various ways.

Broadly speaking, the feelings and symptoms of grief may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and concentration difficulties.

Some outcomes of grief may include: finding a new balance (which doesn't necessarily mean that things will be the same) and growth (readiness to move ahead with one's life.)

Most of the time a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. Eventually, each phase is completed and the person moves ahead. The extent, depth, and duration of the process will also depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and their own situation.

TAKE THE TIME TO GRIEVE

You and your co-workers will need time to grieve. Some things to do:

Create a memorial board.

A photo, card, or special item the person kept on her desk can be a way to remember.

Hold or participate in a fund-raiser

for a special cause or for the family of the deceased.

Create a book of memories

to give to the family. Many people are not aware of the work-life of people they love. These will be unique memories for the family — and a way for you to privately express feelings and memories.

Conduct a workplace-only event.

A luncheon or office-only memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.

Attend the funeral or memorial service.

WHAT TO EXPECT

People experience grief differently.

You — or a co-worker who was particularly close to a person who died — may feel depressed, absent-minded, short tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.

Creating healthy memories is part of healing.

Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or cope differently.

A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality.

If a co-worker dies, you may feel guilty or angry at the person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life. These are normal emotions.

Be aware of how you react to a deceased co-worker's replacement.

Your anger or disappointment at her performance, personality or work style may be less a function of the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing.

Get help if you have trouble coping

with the loss of your co-worker or if you find that your work is suffering. A lag in your performance could be a signal that this loss is affecting you more profoundly than you thought.

RESOURCES AND READINGS

Your employment assistance program (EAP) may have suggestions on bereavement support groups. Many organizations in your community offer bereavement support services. Area hospices work with individuals and families before and after a death, and are experienced in helping with workplace grief issues. Most hospices' bereavement support services are available to *anyone* in the community who has suffered a loss. Hospice bereavement counselors are also available to come to your place of business to talk about grief issues.

The following related publications are also available from the National Hospice Organization:

A Guide To Grief

Grief in the Workplace: A Guide for Managers

Grief in the Workplace: When a Co-worker Suffers a Loss

Additional copies of this brochure are available for sale through the NHO Store. To order, please call 1-800-646-6460.

To receive written information about hospice, or to be put in touch with a hospice serving your community, call the National Hospice Helpline at 1-800-658-8898.



This brochure was originally developed by the Hospice Council of Metropolitan Washington.



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Item Number: 713479

ISBN 0-931207-49-5