

Helping a Grieving Friend in the Workplace

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

How Can You Help?

A friend or acquaintance in your workplace has experienced the death of someone loved. You want to help, but you are not sure how to go about it. This article will help you turn your cares and concerns into positive action.

You Have An Important Role

Your support of a fellow employee can make a real difference in how he survives right now. Being present to a co-worker in grief means you are giving one of life's most precious gifts-yourself. Do not underestimate how your efforts to help can make a real difference for him. Your supportive presence, particularly when he is just returning to work and in the weeks and months ahead, can make an important difference in how your coworker heals.

Attending the Funeral

Even if you didn't know the person who died, if the funeral will be local and especially if the person who died was a member of your co-worker's immediate family, it is very appropriate for you to attend the funeral. After all, funerals are for the living, and right now your co-worker needs all the support she can get. She will appreciate your presence and acknowledgment of the loss.

Understanding Your Co-Worker's Journey

Your coworker is faced with an overwhelming journey. While the need to mourn is normal and necessary, it is often frightening, painful, and lonely. Your coworker will not function "normally" in the workplace. Be sensitive and realize that she will have difficulty with attention, concentration, memory and lack of motivation.

Try to be patient and help out whenever you can. Increasing your knowledge about the experience of grief will help you better understand what your coworker is encountering.

Make Contact

Reach out to your coworker in grief. Do not anticipate that she will be able to reach out to you. Let her know that you are aware of her loss and that you are thinking about her. It can be very appropriate to say, "I'm sorry that your mother died, and I want you to know that I'm thinking of you." This lets your co-worker know that you are available to listen and can be sensitive to her feelings of sadness and loss. A touch of your hand, a look in your eye, or even a hug often communicates more than any words could ever say. If you personally don't know the coworker very well, join with others in sending flowers or a sympathy card.

Listen With Your Heart

If your coworker wants to talk about his grief, LISTEN. While the workplace cannot become a counseling center, listening is a small but important gift you can give. Your physical presence and commitment to listen without judging are critical helping tools.

Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on listening to the words that are being shared with you. Your co-worker may relate the same story about the death over and over again. Listen patiently. Realize that "telling the story" is how healing occurs.

Avoid Clichés

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful mourners. Clichés are trite comments often intended to provide simple solutions to difficult realities. Mourners are often told, "God only challenges people with what they can handle" or "Time heals all wounds" or "Think of all you still have to be thankful for." Comments like these are not constructive. Instead, they hurt because they diminish the very real and very painful loss of a unique person.

Realize That "Griefbursts" Will Occur

Sometimes heightened periods of sadness will overwhelm the grieving person at work. These times can come out of nowhere. Sometimes all it takes to bring on a griefburst is a familiar sound, a smell, a phrase. While you may feel helpless, allow your co-worker to feel the sorrow and hurt. And realize tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with death.

Don't Be Judgmental

Some people return to work after the death of someone loved and act as if "everything is OK." Don't judge your coworker who returns to work quickly. Sometimes, the routine of the workplace provides comfort and support. However, do stay available should she want to share her grief at a later time.

Activate Support Systems

If appropriate, mention your co-worker's loss and need for compassionate support to other coworkers who can offer help. The entire staff might benefit from an in-service that sensitizes them to the grief journey and how they can help support their coworker.

If You Are A Supervisor

Be careful about assigning new tasks or responsibilities right now. Flexible personnel policies will help the grieving worker survive during this naturally painful time. If you have an employee assistance program, be certain the employee is made aware of its availability.

Our society in general doesn't always respond well to people in grief; the workplace can be even worse. You can help by acting as your grieving employee's advocate if he needs extra time off or other special assistance. It's the right thing to do. Besides, if the employee isn't allowed to first attend to his grief, he may not be able to effectively attend to his work.

If The Person Who Died Was A Coworker

When someone you have worked with dies, you will be faced with grief yourself. You may find yourself thinking about him all the time. You may feel guilty, as if you could have prevented the death somehow. You may feel angry, especially if the death was sudden or untimely. You may feel vulnerable, frightened or depressed.

All of these grief feelings are normal and necessary. Find someone you can talk to, perhaps another co-worker who is experiencing the same feelings. Talk openly with family members and friends about your co-workers death.

Understanding The Significance Of The Loss

As a result of the death, your coworker's life is under reconstruction. Keep in mind that grief is unique. No two people respond to death in exactly the same way. Be patient. Don't force a specific timetable for healing. Be gentle, sensitive, and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.

"Grief is a long, painful journey. As the friend of a grieving co-worker, you can choose to help make the journey more tolerable. Tell your co-worker how sorry you are and listen if she wants to talk. Be available to her in the difficult weeks and months ahead. Your support will help her more than you can imagine."

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About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, www.centerforloss.com.

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