

Death and Grief in the Workplace

Since 1980, EveryStep's Amanda the Panda program has delivered love and caring through innovative services such as weekend grief camps, support groups, fun days, school visits and holiday support to inspire hope and healing after the death of a loved one. For more information, visit everystep.org
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Adapted from What's Your Grief

We spend a tremendous amount of time with our co-workers. They touch our lives every day. We work together, laugh together, complain to one another, experience successes and failures together, have good days together, and bad days together. Many times we consider our co-workers friends, sometimes we consider them family. And yet when we experience the death of a co-worker we often don't feel we have permission to grieve in the way we would grieve another friend or family member.

There are many reasons coping with the loss of a co-worker can present unique challenges. Co-workers are not always acknowledged for the significant role they play in our lives, so we may not feel supported in our feelings of grief. People may assume you should be over it quickly. Our family and other friends may not know the co-worker who has died; we may not know the family and friends of our co-worker. It may be unclear or confusing how involved we should be in funerals, memorials, or other remembrance events. If we cannot grieve with our co-workers we may feel completely alone, yet our employers don't always encourage us to grieve openly or together. Emotions and work are not things that usually go together. Work has long been considered a place to be productive, not to shed tears. This can be a hard habit to break.

It is important to acknowledge that as a society we are not comfortable dealing with death, so this is not an issue limited to the workplace. After a death it is not surprising to find that your boss and your HR department are not comfortable with grief, and hence totally lost when it comes to supporting grieving staff. Not to mention they may be grieving themselves. That doesn't mean acknowledging grief in the workplace is a lost cause. We may just need to

be more proactive. So what can you do as a manager, HR professional, or just a "regular" employee?

Acknowledging the loss

We know grieving in the workplace can feel foreign and unnatural. Acknowledging the impact of the death of a co-worker can make sure that everyone feels safe expressing their feelings. The loss of a co-worker is often not validated as a significant loss, so this acknowledgement can allow everyone to feel they have permission to grieve.

Set up a forum for group discussion

Ideally this will be led by a professional counselor, either from the organization's Employee Assistance Program or a professional grief counselor coming in to facilitate a short-term grief group. A professional is a must for a death that occurred physically in the workplace or for a suicide loss.

Grief groups can also be organized among staff. If the group is unable to meet during the workday, it can take the shape of a weekly lunch, breakfast group before work, or dinner group after work.

Take advantage of employer services

Many companies have an EAP that offers one-on-one counseling services. If this is the case, as an employee you may wish to find out what is available and schedule an appointment. As a manager or HR professional it is important after a loss to make sure staff are aware of how to contact the EAP. Send out an email and/or post the information in a staff lounge to ensure everyone knows how to utilize these services.

Do something for the family

For many people it is very important to send flowers or send something else to the family. Make a plan as a team or company to do this. This can be especially important if it may be a financial strain for any individual to send something, but as a group and with the support of management it may be easier. The obvious choice is to send flowers, but there are plenty of other options:

- circulate a card
- send a food basket
- make a donation to a charity the person was connected to
- send a useful item (like a gift card for a maid service, lawn service, or carry out restaurant)
- create a memorial book for the family, with memories and work accomplishments
- gather photos from work events that the family may not have of the person to share
- donate to a scholarship fund for the person's children

Attend the funeral

Co-workers can sometimes feel unsure if they should attend the viewing, funeral, or other memorial. Establishing what the company will support and making plans as a group can ease this uncertainty. As a manager or HR professional it is important to clearly establish whether staff will be allowed to attend a service during work hours or if liberal leave will be in effect. To support people in attending you may wish to plan carpooling from the office, or even a shuttle.

The reality is that many workplaces will not be able to shut down to allow all staff to attend a memorial. If this is the case, ask for volunteers to work. This will allow others to attend the service. Those who were not as close to the person who died, or who do not wish to attend the service, may volunteer. If this is the case make sure to acknowledge them for their willingness to help others who wished to attend.

Create a memorial or a memorial service

Sometimes very few staff will be able to attend a service, due to logistics or if it is being held out of the area. Even if many staff attend the service, doing something specific for the workplace may also be important. A small ceremony where people can share memories is easy to organize and can be very

therapeutic. Additionally, creating a memorial at the office can be a wonderful way to remember the person who has died. A small memorial plaque, planting a tree, naming a conference room or meeting room, or a simple memorial bulletin board like the one I stumbled on at the wine store are all wonderful options! You may also wish to do a memorial slideshow or photobook at an all staff meeting, annual holiday party, or other organizational event.