

# Handling grief and loss in the workplace



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Grief is unavoidable, and most employees will have to deal with the loss of a loved one at some point in their working lives. During these uncertain times, employers are a trusted source of information, and are positioned to help their employees face day-to-day challenges, including grief. That's why it's especially important for employers to understand how grief affects those in the workplace and how they can help their employees cope.

Everyone processes grief differently, and it can have a significant impact that may last for months or longer. That impact can include feelings of numbness, despair and denial, and can show up in the workplace as poor memory and concentration, distraction, sadness and decreased productivity.

## Beyond a short bereavement leave

Most companies recognize the need to grieve and begin the adjustment process to a loss by offering bereavement leave. Employers can also help support the process of grieving and recovery by offering and encouraging the use of services that can help employees handle their loss.

## Before a loss: Advance planning

When end-of-life wishes are documented before they are needed, this can reduce the burden on caregivers who are also loved ones. Taking care of medical directives, estate planning, documenting finances and other important information, and making funeral arrangements beforehand are important steps. These steps ease the grieving process for those left behind, and help a return to normal life afterwards. Remind employees of the availability of EAP services, which often include access to advance planning tools such as will preparation, estate and funeral planning.

## After a loss: Empathy and consideration

Not everyone wants or needs the same response to a loss. Individual and cultural differences matter. After expressing condolences, it's important to simply ask the employee what they need and when they need it. Some want to talk; others would rather be left alone. Some would appreciate coworkers coming to the funeral—or participating in an online funeral or memorial service; others would find it intrusive. Some want a supervisor to let others know about their loved one's passing; others would rather handle that type of communication themselves. The right thing to do is what the employee wants to be done.

Companies should let grieving employees know about any resources their workplace offers, such as an EAP that provides grief counseling or financial and estate assistance. It's wise to initially avoid talking about work issues; that can wait until they're ready to return to work. Most employees will appreciate having a period of time without regular work communications or interruptions.

## Returning to work

Some people find their work routine a welcome distraction and prefer to return to work as soon as possible. Others may need more time away from the workplace to grieve and take care of legal or financial issues. When a grieving employee does come back to work, supervisors should recognize that they may have a period of decreased productivity. In case of a prolonged period of adjustment, a gradual return to their full-time duties might be helpful.

It's also important to re-connect periodically and not assume that being back at work means that the grieving process is done. As time goes on, there may be more emotional ups and downs, and questions about benefits, legal or financial help available to them through work.

## Special considerations

### Complicated grief

The grieving process is different for everyone, and for some, it can become a condition called complicated grief. This happens more often for those who have lost a loved one to homicide or suicide, lost a spouse or child, or had a significant caregiving burden before their loss. If an employee has prolonged or intense symptoms, especially if they do not improve over a few months, it's important to remind them of the availability of EAP services that can refer them to counseling if needed.

Signs of complicated grief can include:

- More intense sadness and isolation
- Intermittent but persistent (often more than 6 months) difficulty functioning at work and home
- Insomnia, distraction, obsessive thoughts
- Thoughts of self-harm

## Grief-related major depression

A small percentage of grieving employees develop major depression. They often have both the symptoms of complicated grief, as well as continual inability to function well at home and at work, intense feelings of sadness and hopelessness, social isolation, thoughts of self-harm, and other symptoms. This is a serious, high-risk psychiatric problem that needs prompt attention; fortunately, most people respond well to appropriate treatment. Supervisors should refer affected employees to EAP and medical services.

## Death of a co-worker

Losing a colleague is sad and shocking, and it's hard to balance grief with necessary practical matters. Supervisors should recognize that each person may react differently. Set aside time to reflect on the loss both collectively and individually; and check in periodically to see how their employees are doing. It's important to temporarily redistribute any work that needs to be done, but permanent reassignment of duties and cleaning of the employee's office often can wait. It shouldn't happen too soon, because of perceived insensitivity; but it also shouldn't be delayed for an overly extended period of time.

Of course, Human Resources should contact the family to help them with any benefits or other resources the company can provide, and also to facilitate the return of any personal belongings that may still be in the workplace.

## Helpful resources for you and your employees:

- Advance planning tools: [The Conversation Project](#)
- A [financial checklist](#) for a surviving spouse
- [An article](#) to help you speak with and support a grieving employee
- [A guide](#) for employees and managers to help with grieving at work

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