

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2025 Edition

Perspective

Dealing with Grief in the Workplace

What great managers do

We all deal with the loss of loved ones at various times in our lives. How should we react and behave when someone at work is going through a grieving process?



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Often enough, we say and do nothing. We use the excuse of giving them the space they need. In reality, we avoid the uncomfortable feelings as much as possible at work - as if it was some sort of hermetically sealed unit where human emotions are not permitted. The result of that approach is that while we may still feel awkward and uncomfortable, so do the people who are suffering. They end up feeling isolated and alone at a time when they could probably use a friend or a helpful co-worker. So, what can you do or say?

Give them space but don't ignore them

After a loss or a traumatic event, it is perfectly fine to give a co-worker the time to mourn, grieve or process what's happened. However, you shouldn't ignore them. Acknowledge the loss initially and then step back. As the days and weeks go by, you can let them know that you are there and will be there for them. This may mean making sure that they don't sit alone at lunch or offer to meet them for coffee. You should reach out, check in and see if they are okay.

Don't patronize them

There are many kind things you can say to a coworker who is going through a loss. Even simple words like 'I'm sorry' or 'Sorry for your loss' are welcome. Make sure that you do not patronize them with platitudes. When you are grieving, the last thing you want to hear is something like 'Everything happens for a reason'. Even worse is the attempt that many people make to get the person who is grieving to just move on. People move on when they're ready, not necessarily when we think they should.

Practice active compassion

One of the best ways to help someone dealing with grief is to practice active compassion. Try to put yourself in their shoes. What would you like someone to say or do? The biggest gift you can give to another person in trouble is your time. Take the time to listen to them when and if they want to talk. You don't even have to say anything - just be there and bear witness to their suffering. Your coworker will never forget you if you can do that.

Be a supportive employer

If you are a manager, there are some additional ways to help an employee deal with a difficult situation in their life. Can you help by reassigning or rescheduling their work? Is there a way to reduce their workload in the short term while the grief may be still raw? If you have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), there may be additional support or counselling that you can make available to a grieving employee or their family. There may be times when they need a timeout. Make sure they can have that when needed.

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Grief is very difficult, especially in the workplace. Like all other strong emotions, it will pass. Understand that it will pass on its own time and on its own terms. Our job in the workplace is not to try to make the grief go away or pretend it is not happening. Our job is to improve how we help others going through it. Everyone will remember you if you've done well at that.

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