

When a Co-worker is Grieving

Tragic and sad events impact everybody's life at one time or another. When a misfortune impacts the life of a co-worker, you may not know the appropriate way to react. Should you offer them assistance or provide them with space and time to grieve on their own? There is no right answer, but the following suggestions can help you determine an appropriate course of action for acknowledging a co-worker's grief and offering your support.

Consider the Cause of the Grief

The first factor to consider when fashioning a response to a co-worker's grief is the cause of the grief. There are many different things that can cause anguish, depression and unsettled feelings in people, and there are different degrees of sadness that can be associated with these feelings.

For example, the death of a loved one is a very common cause of grief. However, the degree of sadness caused by death can vary depending on the relationship and closeness of the people involved. If a co-worker's spouse or parent has died their grief probably be much greater than if it was their great aunt who died. But perhaps the co-worker was raised by the great aunt, or they had a very close relationship thus understanding the nature of the relationship will help you determine an appropriate way to acknowledge and respond to their grief.

Consider the Grieving Process

There are five commonly accepted stages in the grieving process. Determining where your co-worker is in this continuum can help you fashion your response.

The five stages of grieving are:

- 1. Shock.** Shock is the first, most immediate reaction to a traumatic event. People have a hard time realizing what has just happened.
- 2. Anger.** It is common for people to experience feelings of rage and anger after a traumatic event. They may be irritable and be prone to angry outbursts fueled by their emotions.
- 3. Bargaining.** People often try to change or "bargain" with the situation that has caused them grief. They think that if they change something or promise to act differently, the situation will change or become better.
- 4. Depression.** Depression and apathy are feelings encountered throughout the grieving process. Many people may feel that previously important things are now "meaningless."
- 5. Acceptance.** Acceptance is the stage of grieving where things seem to return to "normal." The bereaved accept their situation, know that they can not change it and understand that they have to "move on" with their life and the new circumstance in which they are living.

A person in the shock or anger stage of grieving may not feel up to having a lengthy conversation with you because it is still too early in the grieving process, so offering them a few brief words of support may be the best approach. A person in the depression or acceptance stage of grieving might be more willing or eager to talk, so offering only a few words of support or encouragement would probably be the wrong way to acknowledge their bereavement.

Consider the Nature of Your Relationship

The nature of your relationship with a co-worker is a factor in how you acknowledge their grief. The amount and type of sympathy and support you would show a close co-worker will differ greatly from what you would show a workplace acquaintance.

Perhaps you are very close with the co-worker. You have lunch with them several times each week, and talk considerably about things beyond the realm of the workplace. You will probably take a more in-depth approach to acknowledging their grief than you would for a co-worker who you may say hello to when passing in the hall, but with whom you have never really had any other interaction.

You may tell a close co-worker to call you at home if they are feeling depressed or offer to watch their children for a few hours if they need some time alone. You can offer more casual workplace acquaintances some simple

words of acknowledgement, support and understanding. The extent of your kindness varies in degrees, but your words and actions of support in each case will be appreciated by the bereaved person.

Talk with Other Co-workers

Talking with other co-workers about how to respond to the grief of a fellow worker is often a positive experience. Other people in your office may have ideas for ways to help, support and comfort the grieving co-worker. Working together can also help eliminate any "duplication of efforts" for helping the bereaved.

Many people choose to express their sympathy through group offerings of condolences or assistance. You and your co-workers might also work together to "pick up the slack" for a fellow employee who is going through a difficult time.

Offer Support

The eventual outcome of this process is an understanding of the situation your co-worker is experiencing, culminating in an appropriate show of support for the individual and their family. Support can take many forms such as:

- Simple spoken or written words of understanding and encouragement.
- Maintaining your normal level of communications (do not shy away from close co-workers or become suddenly overly-attentive to a casual acquaintance).
- Understanding a grieving person may not be capable of doing their "best work" at this time.
- Including the co-worker in social events and plans.
- Respecting their need for privacy or "alone time."
- Just "being there" if they need somebody to talk with.
- Helping them utilize their Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if they need to talk with a professional therapist or a grief counselor.

There is no timetable for how long the grieving process will last. All people experience, internalize and cope with tragic events in their own way and on their own schedule. But by providing an appropriate and caring show of support and empathy you can greatly help grieving co-workers as they work to adapt to their new physical or emotional circumstance.

Here when you need us.

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