

# Coping with the death of a co-worker

We spend most of our waking hours with co-workers. When someone dies, it can be devastating, especially if it is unexpected.

Initial emotions can range from denial and shock to disbelief and fear. How we cope depends on a variety of factors including our personal beliefs, how we last interacted with the person and other stressors in our lives.

It's important to know that grief is a normal and natural response to loss and not a weakness. Although it is possible to delay or postpone grieving, it is not possible to avoid it altogether. Grief will subside over time; however, the process is not linear. People need time to identify, accept and express their emotions.

## What is grieving?

Grieving is the process of emotional and life adjustment you go through after a loss. It is a personal experience and depending on who you are and the nature of your loss, your process of grieving will be different from another person's experience. Some co-workers may have been closer to the deceased than others. Everyone will need their own time and space to heal. Colleagues that handle the loss differently should not be judged. Remember that feelings may resurface when certain activities remind everyone of the co-worker they lost.

## Common symptoms

- Guilt, real or imagined, is normal. The feeling that if only something had been different, the deceased might have lived, is common. By learning to express and share this feeling with others, eventually you may forgive yourself.
- A wish to join the loved one who died is natural.
- Despair and loneliness are common. Even when you are with a group of people, you may feel alone. Few people can understand how deeply the loss of a co-worker or friend hurts unless they have been there.

- Anger often emerges and it can be aimed at a person imagined to have caused the death, at others who cannot understand your feelings, at a higher power, even at the very person who died.
- Sleeplessness is common, as is a weakened immune system over time. If you have a chronic illness, grieving can make your condition worse.

## What you can do

- Maintain a balanced diet, rest and moderate exercise.
- Turn to friends, loved ones and support groups to work through this time while you are finding the new "you" and work dynamics are changing.
- Find hope and comfort through sharing your story with others and being able to speak the name of the deceased without fear of others turning away when the tears do come. Sharing eases loneliness and allows expression of grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.
- Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol in hopes of making the pain go away. Prescription medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of a physician.
- Plan how you will handle special days such as anniversary dates and holidays. Often the day is easier than the dread that often leads up to it.
- If you find yourself struggling, call your program for support.

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