

COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A COWORKER

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Right now we're living with changes to our normal routines, many unknowns and concerns for our safety and health. Feelings, such as anxiety, fear, and grief can become even more real when we learn that a coworker has died from COVID-19. Our coworkers can be friends and even "extended family." They're often present for important life events and may be close with our families. When we lose a coworker, we may be impacted in significant, and sometimes unexpected, ways.

Feelings and reactions to the death

Grief is expressed in very personal ways. The death of a coworker will affect each person differently. Reactions and feelings of grief can be shaped by a number of different factors.

Relationship you shared. It may have been strictly professional or have deepened to become a close friendship. As with family members, some work relationships may even become tense or difficult. The specifics of your relationship with the person will impact your experience of grief.

Cause of death. Experiencing the death of someone close to us from any infectious illness can be traumatic. The progression of COVID-19 can be sudden and rapid, leaving you unprepared for the news. Your feelings and reactions may be strong, including shock, anger, confusion, disbelief, helplessness, or guilt, to name a few.

In addition to your response to the loss of your coworker, you may feel a sense of vulnerability and risk that you did not feel before. You may have increased fear for your own health, especially if you worked closely with them or were similar in age or share other characteristics.

In the workplace. Losing a coworker can be both a personal and professional loss. If your workplace is a team environment, the loss of a key employee may have an impact on your job. The grief experience can be amplified if there have been other losses at your workplace in the past. The loss can hit especially hard if your workplace has never experienced a death before. Some workplace cultures are uncomfortable with expressions of grief or emotion. Others tend to be more open to and supportive of expressing emotions.

Understanding the emotions of grief

Grieving is a complex and challenging process with varying degrees of intensity. Your reactions can be overwhelming one moment and less noticeable the next. They may be triggered by ongoing news stories about the disease, reminding you of your grief every day.

Grief is sometimes compared to the ebbing and flowing waves of the ocean. Sometimes they can crash over you, knock you off your feet and threaten to drown you or sweep you out to sea. Other times you feel them just gently lap at your feet.

There is no “normal” reaction to loss and no “right” way to grieve. Many different emotions may be felt as we come to terms with the loss and try to fold it into our everyday lives. Possible reactions include:

- › **Shock** is a common first reaction, especially when the progression of the disease can be so sudden. Shock is often followed by denial or disbelief. This may be a way that our minds initially shield us from overwhelming emotions.
- › **Sadness** may be very intense and deep, especially if you were close to the person who died.
- › **Grief** from other losses may be triggered.
- › **Helplessness**, feeling like there’s nothing you can do to provide help or support from a distance.
- › **Anger**, a lack of patience, or being short-tempered.
- › **Numbness** or not being able to feel your emotions.
- › **Feeling alone** or isolated in your grief, especially if you are newly working from home, or observing social distancing in your workplace.
- › **Guilt** or self-blame regarding an unpleasant last conversation, tension in the relationship or an inability to help them. Struggling with the “what ifs.”
- › **Restlessness**, absentmindedness, and poor concentration are also common.
- › **Fear** about your safety and health, wondering if you, other colleagues, or a loved one could get sick, too.
- › **Feeling vulnerable**, aware of your own mortality.
- › **Betrayal**, mistrust, tension, or anger; feeling that the death is something that shouldn’t have happened.
- › **Anxiety** about how the workplace will function without the deceased, such as how the workload will be addressed.
- › **A need to return to a normal routine**; a sense of urgency or expectation to “move on” from the loss. This can be made worse if normal work processes are currently disrupted by stay-at-home or shelter-in-place directives.

Physical symptoms of grief may also occur. Symptoms could include: headaches, insomnia, digestive problems, or feeling tired or irritable. You may experience changes in appetite or increased drug or alcohol use.

Coping with grief

How can we cope with grief in the workplace, especially if we can’t be together and when our normal work processes may be “in flux?”

Avoid judging your own or others’ reactions. Give yourself and coworkers permission to experience the emotions that come up. Everyone grieves differently.

Talk with others. It can help to have a way for everyone to share memories or emotions openly. Consider a way for people to post stories, memories, and pictures of the person. If your workplace is currently virtual, consider a discussion board, email chain, or group chat for this purpose. Check in on colleagues and reach out if you need to talk.

Be kind to yourself. It’s healthy to take a break if you become tearful, are struggling, or overwhelmed with emotion.

Consider doing something for the family as a team. It may be sending flowers, a donation to a charity, making a memory book or sending photos of the deceased that the family may not have. These mementos may be especially valuable if they are unable to hold a memorial or funeral service. Consider pooling financial contributions to give gift cards for useful items, such as child care, meals, etc.

Memorials or goodbye rituals may be helpful. You may wish to create a memorial to the person in the workplace, such as planting a tree in their honor or hanging a memorial plaque in the office when you have returned to the workplace. If working remotely, you may want to gather virtually as a team to talk, share memories, and honor your coworker.

Self-care is vital during times of stress. Make sure to eat well. Get regular exercise and the sleep you need to feel rested. It can help to express your emotions and talk about the experience with friends, family members, or a counselor.

This situation can be distressing, sad, and scary. It can be hard to focus on work in the midst of all you are facing. Remember, you are not alone in this. While everyone’s reactions may be unique, you share this experience and can support one another. Together you can honor your coworker’s contributions, and over time, refocus on your job duties and goals.

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