

COPING WHEN A COLLEAGUE DIES

The death of a colleague can be a shock, depending on the circumstances. It leaves both a personal and professional void in a workplace. We spend many hours of our lives with our co-workers. We form relationships with them, even if those relationships consist of merely saying hello as we pass by someone's desk each morning. A co-worker's death can mean the loss of someone who we depend on to help us do our job, but also the loss of a friend. The death of a colleague we barely knew can also affect us as the reality of death comes close to home.

The effects of loss will be determined by many factors including but not limited to: the length of time you spent working together, the nature of your relationship, the age of your colleague, the suddenness of their death, and other personal challenges you may be facing at this time of the loss.

The Grief Process

During the days and weeks that follow the death of a colleague, you and your colleagues may feel that you are riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. Most people go through these stages not in linear steps, but in unpredictable waves- moving through one stage to the next and at times shifting back and forward. Some people will experience certain stages but not others.

Here are some common, typical grief reactions. Remember they are not typical for all people or exhaustive:

- **Shock and disbelief** - the numbing and disorientating sense that the death has not really happened which can last from several hours to days, even weeks;
- **Anger** - at yourself, others and/or God or fate for what happened;
- **Guilt** - you may blame yourself for not doing or knowing more, or for not dealing with any 'unfinished matters' that you had with the deceased;
- **Sadness** - you may experience a deep sense of loss and find yourself crying. There may be a tendency to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities, or feel helpless or hopeless. Other recent losses may come back to you;
- **Fear** - there may be anxiety or panic; fear about the future. It may bring up fears about your own sense of mortality and that of loved ones;
- **Acceptance** - finally, a stage where you adjust to the loss and move on from it, while continuing to honour the deceased's memory.

Some Reactions to Grief

While some staff will quickly return to normal functioning, some who were closer to the person who died, or those for whom the death triggered possible painful memories, might exhibit some of the following:

- Decreased concentration and memory.
- Sleep disturbances and fatigue.
- Changes in eating habits.
- Sadness and tearfulness.
- Headaches, muscle tension and stomach aches.



- Irritability and frustration.
- Depression and emptiness.

On a team level you may find yourself and your co-workers experiencing:

- Decreased individual and team morale;
- Strained staff relationships;
- Reduced productivity;
- Low energy and poor concentration;
- Higher rates of absenteeism.

Ways to Cope with the Loss

Acknowledge the Loss

It is better to give yourself and others permission to talk about what happened and its impact, than to go on as if nothing had happened.

Acknowledge Individual Reactions

When someone dies it affects each person in a very unique way. Some may be deeply affected by the loss while others are not. Some people want to talk about their feelings while others want privacy. It may take some much longer than others to adjust to the loss. While many people find comfort from strong religious or spiritual beliefs, others will not share those belief systems. Be aware of the different ways that people understand and react to the loss and respect those differences.

Support Each Other

This is not an easy time; therefore adjustments may need to be made to support any colleagues who are particularly affected by the loss. They may not be at their best. Be accommodating, gentle and understanding with one another during this time. Find ways to cooperate to share any additional workload. Take time to reflect on the life of the person who died.

Take Care of Yourself

Grief can be emotionally and physically exhausting. You may need to give yourself extra amounts of the things that nourish and replenish you - rest, relaxation, exercise, doing things you enjoy. You may need professional assistance if you find yourself not able to function as you would like as a result of the loss.

Remember Your Colleague

There are many ways of remembering an employee who has died that can be put into practice in the workplace. For example, create a memorial board with photos and comments, share tributes in an employee newsletter or website, arrange for a work-only memorial service or remembrance workplace lunch, attend the funeral or memorial event etc.

Making Life Changes

For most people, the death of someone they know causes them to think about their life. We tend to believe we have lots of time to accomplish things or be there for our families, but

death reminds us that life can change in a moment. Take the time to rethink your life and write down a list. What are your goals and dreams? Are you taking care of yourself physically and emotionally? Do you get regular medical and dental checkups? Are your affairs in order? Then, both to honour the memory of your colleague, and to take care of yourself, take the steps in order to accomplish what's on your list. Start with baby steps and don't wait for someone to die before you take time to review your life.

Self - Care and Coping Strategies

Coping with the death of a colleague will be a hard and demanding challenge. It is important that you look after yourself through this process.

Do's

- Acknowledge the loss.
- Accept grief as part of life, don't resist, fight or avoid it.
- Be receptive to your emotional reactions.
- Give yourself permission to experience your emotions; it is natural to feel anger, guilt, confusion and sadness. It is also okay to feel nothing.
- Accept that feeling better will take time, be patient with yourself. Make sure that your self expectations are realistic.
- Explore your emotional responses, keep a diary, express yourself artistically, take long walks etc.
- Recognize that you'll be moving in and out of different feelings, and your ability to focus will waver.
- Take breaks as needed.
- Breathe. When you're at work and the demands of your job and the demands of your grief together feel overwhelming, stop what you're doing for a few minutes and breathe deeply. Breathe from your diaphragm; push your belly out as you breathe in and your belly in as you breathe out. Imagine that you're inhaling the spiritual energy you need to heal and that you're exhaling your sadness and bad feelings.
- Spend quality time with those you love.
- Allow others to help you by listening and offering practical help. However, also be willing to tell people what you need and what would be helpful.
- Exercise - this can help counteract the stress hormones and adrenalin in your body and promote endorphins (nature's antidepressants);
- Grief and stress can suppress the immune system so it is important to eat healthy and drink plenty of water. See your GP if you have any health concerns
- Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed. While a counsellor or psychologist may not be able to "make the pain go away" they are likely to provide emotional support and suggest strategies which may assist you getting through this difficult time.

Don't

- Expect to mourn or heal in a certain timeframe. There is no set timetable for grief.
- Expect to be "over" your grief in a certain number of months or even years.
- Use alcohol or illegal substance to numb the consequences of the loss. These can cause many problems and result in poor quality sleep, leaving you to feel more tired and overwhelmed.
- Take any medication for sleep unless under medical advice.



- Fight sleeplessness, instead get up, read, walk, exercise, keep a journal, write your thoughts down
- Try to fight recurring thoughts, images or flashbacks. They are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Make any major decisions or big life changes.
- Automatically stay away from work.
- Make major decisions, for as long as feasible, as grief can impact decision making;

When to Seek Professional Help

Getting professional help isn't a sign of weakness. It just may be that this event is more than you can deal with at this time in your life.

Consider getting help or encouraging your colleagues to get help if you or anyone else in your team experiences any of these;

- Continuing distress from two weeks after the death;
- Irritability, tearfulness, feeling on the edge
- Inability to function normally at work or at home;
- Feelings of desperation, not being able to face the future;
- Thoughts of self-harm or harming someone else

If you think that counselling may help you can use the Employee Assistance Programme. Call Stratos on 0800 787 2867.