

# Grief in the Workplace

## Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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Grief is the normal and natural response to loss, a universal human experience. Life-threatening illness and death in the family are common problems affecting workplace performance and morale. If not facing their own death, many employees may be grieving over the loss of a family member, friend, neighbor or co-worker. While trying to focus on their work, they are distracted by their own grief or by the needs of dying relatives.

Although we try to establish healthy boundaries between our work and personal lives, we know the importance of jobs and co-workers. For many, work provides a sense of community, and for some it even feels like family.

Every workplace must deal with complex emotional issues, and grief is one of those issues. Colleagues want to do the right thing, but they are not sure what that is. Managers and employees may feel pressured knowing the work must get done, yet are still trying to be compassionate. We often end up with conflicting and confusing emotions. It is often beneficial to get help in working through grief.

The Washington State Employee Assistance Program (EAP) will help with grief support for employees, guidance for managers and recommendations for appropriate employer responses.

### What is grief?

- Grief is a normal process, a healthy sense of loss, an avenue to constructive growth.
- Grief and loss are inseparable and can lead to sometimes acute forms of anxiety and deep depression.
- Grief results from any loss: A relationship, divorce, change of jobs, geographics, retirement, death, loss of role, etc.
- Grief is a distinct emotional process to be worked through, and if the process is allowed to happen, occurs in an orderly, natural way.
- Anticipatory grief is the process of going through all the phases of grief in advance as a safeguard against the expected impact of the coming loss (as in terminal illness).
- There is a pattern or process to grief, as follows:
  - Shock, denial, isolation
  - Anger
  - Guilt/Bargaining
  - Depression and anxiety
  - Acceptance and healing

### Individual losses affecting the workplace

- Death of a coworker
- A coworker experiencing death of a family member

- Unresolved grief over old losses
- Separation/divorce
- Job loss, transfer or denied promotion
- Moving
- Personal injury
- Miscarriage
- Property loss
- Empty nest

### **Recognizing grief in the workplace**

- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of interest or motivation
- Lowered tolerance level
- Chronic fatigue
- Depression
- Decreased productivity
- Decreased morale
- Anger (sometimes aimed at management)
- Increased stress levels
- Turnover and added training costs
- Shifting workloads (temporary response to loss)

### **Things to say**

- I am sorry to hear about your loss.
- I heard about your loss, and I don't know what to say.
- Remember the story you told me about (the deceased). Shared memories can help.
- See handouts.
- "Is there anything I can do to help?" (Suggestions for friends and relatives of the grieving survivor).
- Helping a grieving person.

### **Things to Avoid Saying**

- Time heals.
- Don't cry - it'll make things worse.
- You've got to stay strong.
- They're in a better place now.
- Look at what you have to be thankful for.
- What you need to do is keep busy.
- I know how you feel. (Each person's loss is unique.)
- You're young, you can get married again.
- You can always have another baby.
- After all, he/she has lived a long life.

- It's part of God's plan.
- Call me if you need anything.

### **Returning to Work**

- Home visits, phone calls, lunches - stay connected
- Be respectful, some may not want contact from work - perhaps designate only one contact person who can communicate for the workplace, as well as relay the business information (insurance, sick leave/shared leave).
- Returning for half days (policy considerations)
- What to say
- When there are tears
- Be respectful if the person is wanting more privacy upon return to work

### **How can I help? - Manager**

As a manager you still have work responsibilities (deadlines to meet, work to get done, staying within budget, etc.). As a good manager you also care about a grieving employee and want that person to feel supported and valued. You want them to know they can contribute to the agency's success, and this is a hard balance to find. When a death affects a workplace, and an employee(s) is grieving, the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict.

- Remember grief is important and necessary. "Snapping out of it" will not return the employee to a comfortable and productive life.
- Grief is hard work, and it is lonely work, and you can't make it go away. What a manager can do is help create an environment where the work can progress.
- Managers can set an example of caring support and professionalism, which will set a standard that will last long after the experience.
- If the employee has not returned to work, stay in touch. Co-workers may agree on one person to represent them, but supervisors should still make sure they stay in touch as well. This greatly adds to healing.
- Get help with all of this as needed (call EAP).
- Before the employee returns to work, the manager can ask how he/she can help.
- Areas to help could be in asking the employee what information they would like shared with the other employees. They can ask for details about what the employees want others to know.
- Some employees want to talk with the workplace themselves, and if so, the manager can ask how they would like to do that (Informally? Meeting?)
- The manager can ask about needs for privacy, time, quiet places to go during the day, temporary help with workload.
- Don't be surprised if the answers to these questions change each day. Emotions are very confused at this time, and people are often too tired and too numb to know their needs. Be prepared to ask possibly even daily what is needed.

### **How can I help? - Coworkers**

- Offer specific help (making meals; inviting them to a picnic lunch, and you bring the food; doing a certain amount of their job responsibilities for a temporary period of time).
- Acknowledge your coworker's loss and their grief. Remember, there is really no right thing to say. To say anything at all is better than to stay silent and further perpetuate the grieving employee's sense of isolation.
- Shared feelings can communicate a lot ("I remember my mother's death....." or "I'm so sorry about.....")
- Crying with them is okay.
- Expect to hear the same story again and again from the grieving employee. Part of the healing process is talking. Remember your own boundaries at work and at home. Let the grieving person know this is not a good time to talk, and set a time when you can talk ("Can we have lunch together today?").
- If you are uncomfortable with what you are hearing, let the person know it is difficult for you right now.
- Touch can communicate more than words especially to those who are already feeling isolated.
- Remember the holidays and the anniversaries. Those are hard times for a grieving employee.
- If you have concerns about how the employee is doing, talk with your supervisor and tell them the specifics of what you are seeing and what is causing concern. Remember also, you don't have to do this alone. You can also talk with EAP about what is happening and how to handle it. And you can also ask the employee to call EAP, as they don't have to do it alone either.