

When a Co-worker Dies

Effects on Individuals

Employees working in departments who have lost a staff member due to death may experience a number of feelings over the days and weeks following the death. Strong personal bonds are often formed within work groups, and the experience of grieving a co-worker's death can be profound. The intensity of reactions will vary among individuals, but the following experiences are common:

- numbness, shock and disbelief
- decreased concentration and memory
- increased anxiety
- sleep disturbances, fatigue
- change in eating habits
- sadness, tearfulness
- headaches, muscle tension, stomach ache
- irritability, frustration
- depression, emptiness

Effects in the Workplace

Departments which have recently experienced a loss due to death are presented with a number of issues. There may be difficulties with productivity and attendance for those most affected by the loss. If new information about the deceased emerges at the time of death, or if events surrounding the death are upsetting, some employees may be shocked, anxious or confused.

Decisions about the deceased employee's possessions, workspace and job responsibilities will have to be made; it is important that these decisions are made with a sensitivity for all those affected. There might be feelings of guilt, resentment or uneasiness for staff members who assume roles previously handled by the deceased coworker. Also, certain work situations may serve as reminders of the loss, and may trigger grief reactions unexpectedly.

It is important to understand that the emotional environment at work will be changed for a period of time, and that everyone will have their own unique reaction to the loss. Acknowledging and discussing the impact of the death can help with the process. In addition to offering counseling services for individuals, the Help Center can also provide facilitators to lead discussions in departments who would like to meet as a group.

Things to do

- Be aware of each other.

If it appears that someone is having a serious problem coping with the death, express concern and encourage them to seek professional assistance through the Help Center or other resources (see list below).

- Accept that work may be affected.

You and your co-workers' job performance and interactions may be affected by the stress. In time, things will return to normal. If the death is suicide, homicide, unexpected or occurred in the workplace, the emotional trauma experienced will be more severe and the need for outside help will be greater.

- Contact the family of the deceased.

Consider sending cards, flowers or other gifts, such as a book of memories written by the staff, to a surviving spouse or child.

- Attend or organize a memorial service.

Whether conducted on or off the work site, a memorial service can be another important step for acknowledging feelings and coming to terms with the death.

- Consider establishing a memorial at work.

Buying a bench or planting a tree are examples of ways to honor the deceased.

(Article Courtesy of the Stanford Help Center)