

Grief in the Workplace

Grief affects all of us at different times and places in our lives. The workplace is not untouched by grief. Grief in the workplace occurs when you or a co-worker has experienced a personal loss or a workplace loss such as a death. It is important to remember that everyone grieves differently and everyone needs time to adjust to the loss. Here are some tips to help you and your co-workers cope with your grief:

Remembering your co-worker

- Attend the funeral or memorial service of the person who died.
- Create a memorial board. Encourage your co-workers to post messages or memories that remind them of your co-worker.
- Consider holding a memorial service at your workplace. A brief service of remembrance can be helpful.
- Even if it is just a time to set aside for you and your co-workers to acknowledge your unique relationships with your co-worker.
- Remember the person at staff meetings or annual events. These are times when grief reactions can resurface for you and your co-workers.
- Hold or join in a fundraiser for a special cause in memory of the deceased.
- Stay in touch with the deceased's family. Send a card or note to let them know you have not forgotten them or your co-worker.

Offering support to co-workers and employees

- Supporting each other and your employees will be essential to the grieving and healing process and maintaining a healthy workplace.
- Know the company's bereavement policies and ways the company can provide support.
- Respect confidentiality and avoid gossip. If the deceased's family is private about the details, set that example for co-workers or employees.
- Be flexible and support one another. What someone needs today may be different tomorrow.
- Listen. Co-workers and employees may need to talk about the person who died for weeks or months to come.

Grief and Loss Following Traumas and Disasters

Everyone has been affected in some way by tragedies that have occurred in recent years, from the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, the events on September 11, 2001, tsunamis and earthquakes. Even if not directly affected, most people either know someone who lived where these events have happened or they have been there themselves. Perhaps you are wondering, "Why did this happen?" "What is happening in the world?!" "How do I cope?" "How do we go on?" "Are my feelings normal?"

Many people have been touched by these events at a deep, human level. The ranges of emotions you experience are normal reactions to very unusual and abnormal events. If you feel apprehensive, confused, or uncertain, it is probably related to the fact that these were very frightening events. You may have never been touched in this way by so many different, horrific situations. Understand that you may continue to experience unusual thoughts or feelings for weeks and even months after a scary event or disaster.

Take time to understand your reactions. Look within yourself to figure out what you need to do to cope and take care of yourself, both mentally and physically. Some of the normal reactions you may have include:

- Difficulty focusing
- Lack of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased headaches or tiredness
- Feelings of guilt, anger, fear, anxiety
- Dreams or nightmares
- Frequent mood changes

If you have experienced other losses or stressful events in your life, your reactions may become even more complex. Just as you heal physically from major physical injuries, you can heal from emotional wounds. Your reactions mean you are grieving changes and learning to cope with loss. It is normal to experience these reactions, and part of what can help is taking the time to look at what you need to do to best adjust.

You may wonder if life will ever be 'normal' again--either for you, how you view the world, or for those more directly affected by the tragedies. You and the world around you have been changed by what has happened, but a sense of routine and 'normalcy' will eventually return. What develops is a 'new normal,' not a return to how things were. As you make this change, if you are feeling helpless, remember there is still much that you can do at a personal and local level.

Consider some of the following actions that are healing and can be life-affirming:

- Acknowledge emotions as they arise- allow yourself to cry, or talk things through as you need to
- Seek out others who will listen
- Consider other forms of self-expression-journaling, poetry, music
- Exercise regularly and spend time outdoors in nature
- Maintain your day-to-day routine
- Reflect upon, reprioritize, or perhaps simplify your life
- Volunteer somewhere to make a difference
- Reach out to others, support a relief effort
- Talk to a counselor

Hospices throughout the country offer grief support to anyone in the community who has had a loss through death. Staffed with professional grief counselors, they are an additional resource for materials, support, and help. Find a hospice in your area or call 800/658-8898.

The American Red Cross has developed a nationwide program entitled Together We Prepare to help people gain the skills needed to prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies in homes, workplaces, communities, and the world. They have identified five ways individuals can feel better prepared: make a plan, build a kit, get trained, volunteer, and give blood.

Volunteering with local organizations such as the American Red Cross or a hospice in your community are ways you can become involved and make a difference in the lives of others. Activities such as these can help to offset some of the more distressing reactions you may be experiencing in trying times.