

Stanford Help Center

Grief and Loss in the Workplace

Phone: 650-723-4577 or

Email: helpcenter@lists.stanford.edu

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, work space 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. At the Stanford Grief and Loss Website (see "Stanford Resources" below) an online memorial message may be created.

Serious Illness, Death, and Grieving at Work: Guidelines for Supervisors and Managers

When employees are affected by the death of a co-worker, personal loss, or serious illness, managers and supervisors are faced with the challenge of insuring that employees are adequately supported while work responsibilities are being met. The following suggestions are intended to help supervisors when these difficult situations arise.

Helping an employee who is grieving

Be sensitive and straightforward. Create an atmosphere of open communication for everyone. Make contact with the grieving employee as soon as possible.

It is important to acknowledge their grief and loss openly, even though it may feel awkward to initiate a conversation. Feel free to share a caring reaction to their loss while being sensitive to the confidential nature of personal or medical information.

Expect to do more listening than talking. Patience, compassion optimism and availability are helpful qualities to demonstrate. Be sure to ask what you can share and what is confidential, and ask about specific things you can do to help.

Don't be surprised if the employee needs to talk about the loss many times, especially during holidays and anniversaries, which may be very difficult. It is common for people who have experienced a loss to exhibit periodic tears, low spirits and uneven productivity for a while.

Grief can last quite a while. Don't expect a quick recovery. The process is different for everyone. The supervisor's job is to create an accepting environment, where the process of grieving is treated as normal, yet work still gets done. If an individual seems to be slipping into depression and you are concerned about the level or severity of their reaction, the Help Center is a good place to go for consultation, or to refer the employee.

In cases of loss from suicide, homicide, workplace death, or death of a child, reactions are normally quite severe and you can advise the employee about the usefulness of individual counseling and support groups. The Help Center can provide brief counseling services and make referrals to suitable groups and therapists in the community.

In the case of serious illness

Become familiar with the health status, capabilities and medical restrictions of the affected employee that affects their work, and make reasonable accommodations. Realize there may be periods of absenteeism or hospitalization to stabilize their condition. Be watchful that people don't exceed their limitations. It is helpful to consult with Human Resources about leave guidelines and adjusting job responsibilities.

Respect privacy, but encourage the affected employee to share with you whatever information they feel comfortable sharing about their illness or other problems, and direct them to appropriate resources when necessary.

Be realistic when discussing plans about work. The Help Center, Human Resources and the Benefits Office can help with planning for returning to work or leaving the workplace. Everyone benefits when employees maintain a sense of self-esteem, identity and integrity as long as possible.

When a staff member dies

Meet with your staff to clarify the facts, talk about feelings and acknowledge the grieving process. Unanticipated deaths may require additional times to talk. Help Center counselors are available to facilitate meetings where feelings are particularly strong. In cases of suicide, homicide, or a death that occurred at work, debriefing the staff may be particularly important. Decisions about the deceased person's work space, belongings and job responsibilities will need to be discussed and handled sensitively.

Notify your Human Resources Officer and the Benefits Office. The Stanford Report is available to handle the public notice of the death.

It is important that employees know of memorial or funeral arrangements and have time to attend. Appropriate acknowledgment of the employee who died is important. A tribute in the newspaper, a charitable donation, a gift to the family, or some other public acknowledgment might be discussed with the staff.

Helping other staff

When possible, ensure that your staff knows the facts about what happened and about funeral or memorial plans. Mention that there are

resources available within the organization and the community to help cope during stressful times (see list at the end of this brochure).

Mutual support and sharing among the staff should be encouraged, as well as expressions of grief and sympathy to families and loved ones. Sometimes it is valuable to have one employee volunteer to be the primary on-site contact with the family.

In very difficult situations such as suicide, homicide, or a workplace death, shock, disbelief, fear and confusion are common. Open discussion can help clarify the facts, dispel rumors and facilitate the grieving process. Help Center counselors are available to lead group discussions.

If the grief affects many staff members, it may take some time for things to return to business as usual. It may be impossible for some employees to work at their normal level of productivity, at least temporarily. Co-workers who take on extra workloads during such a transition should be appreciated and acknowledged.

Stanford Resources

- Stanford Grief and Loss Web Site (includes online memorial site)
<http://grief.stanford.edu/index.html>
- Stanford Help Center, (650) 723-4577
- Univ. Deans of Religious Life, (650) 723-1762
<http://religiouslife.stanford.edu/>
- Hospital Spiritual Care Service, (650) 723-5101
<http://www.stanfordhospital.com/forPatients/patientServices/chaplaincyServices.html>
- Hospital Grief and Loss Committee, (650) 497-8587

Web Resources for Grief and Serious Illness

National Organizations

- The Association for Death Education — <http://www.adec.org/>
- HIVInfo.org — <http://www.hivinfo.org/>
- Pet Loss — <http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/animatedjourneys/goodbyefriend/goodbye.asp>
- Survivors of Suicide — <http://www.thewebpacer.com/sos/>

- The Neptune Society (Economical Alternatives to traditional burial/funeral) — <http://www.neptunesociety.com/>

Hospice

- Bay Area Hospice List — <http://www.volunteerinfo.org/hospice2.htm>
- Hospice of the Valley — <http://www.hospicevalley.org/>
- Pathways — <http://www.hospicehomecare.org/>
- Visiting Nurse Associate (Hospice at Home)
<http://www.volunteerinfo.org/hospice.htm>

Local Support and Counseling

- Bereavement Resources in Alameda County
<http://members.aol.com/leepster/otheralameda.html>
- Compassionate Friends
<http://www.billwilsoncenter.org/compassionate.html>
- HAND - Helping After Neonatal Death
<http://www.handonline.org/index.html>
- Kara (Grief counseling for adults and children)
<http://www.kara-grief.org/>
- Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Family Resources
<http://www.lpch.org/clinicalSpecialtiesServices/COE/PulmonaryCareCF/familyServicesPulmonaryCareCF.html>

Other Resources

- Bibliography - Grief in the Workplace
<http://www.twpcc.org/myhtml/grief-workplace.html>