

# How Leaders Can Show Support During Difficult Times

## How Grief Affects Your Team

Employees can experience a wide range of emotions after the death of a co-worker, family member, or friend. These emotions will vary depending on their relationship with the person and their personal coping mechanisms. Here are some common feelings that employees may have:

- **Shock and disbelief:** Initially, employees may feel shocked and find it hard to believe that their colleague, family member, or friend has passed away. It can be particularly challenging to accept the loss if the death was unexpected or sudden.
- **Grief and sadness:** Grief is a natural response to loss, and employees may feel a deep sense of sadness when someone close to them dies. They may mourn the loss of a personal or professional relationship, shared experiences, and the potential future interactions they could have had.
- **Anguish and emotional distress:** A death can be distressing, leading to intense feelings of anguish, helplessness, and emotional pain. Some individuals may struggle with sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, or difficulty concentrating due to the emotional toll.
- **Sense of loss and emptiness:** Employees may experience a sense of emptiness in the workplace or at home, as the absence of their colleague, family member, or friend serves as a reminder of the void left behind. This feeling can be especially pronounced if the person who passed away was a close friend or a team member they worked closely with.
- **Guilt and regret:** Some employees might experience guilt or regret if they feel they believe they could have done something differently to prevent the death or if they had unresolved issues or conflicts with the deceased individual. These feelings are normal but need to be processed and understood within the context of grief.
- **Support and solidarity:** In times of loss, employees often come together and provide support to each other. They may share memories, offer condolences, and create a supportive environment where individuals can express their emotions and find solace in the shared experience.
- **Reflection on mortality:** A death can also prompt employees to reflect on their own mortality and the fragility of life. It may lead them to reevaluate their priorities, deepen their appreciation for their loved ones, or contemplate their own life choices.

It's important to note that individuals may have unique reactions to the death of a colleague, family member, or friend, and the grieving process can vary widely. Managers and leaders should check with their HR department to learn what options are possible before extending services to employees (i.e. counseling or bereavement leave) to help employees navigate this difficult time.

## Strategies to Support Your Team Member Through the Grieving Process

When someone at work experiences a sudden loss or death, corporate leaders can help support their employees in the following ways:

- **Show that you care:** Reach out to the person affected and let them know you're sorry for their loss. Tell them you're there to support them and listen if they want to talk.
- **Make them aware of your company's grief policy:** If possible, offer them some time off from work to deal with their grief and take care of personal matters. Check with your HR team to determine what is possible first.
- **Remind them about support that is available:** Whether it's sharing information about digital mental health programs like Learn to Live or connecting them with other resources, let them know that it's okay to ask for help.
- **Create a caring work environment:** Make sure your workplace is a kind and understanding place. Let employees know it is okay to talk about their feelings and support each other. Show empathy toward those who are grieving.
- **Protect their privacy:** Respect their privacy and don't share any personal details without their permission. Treat any sensitive information with care and respect.
- **Remember the person who passed away:** If the employee agrees, you can organize a special event to honor the person they lost. This can help everyone remember and share their memories.
- **Check in regularly:** Keep in touch with the person affected and see how they're doing even after some time has passed. Let them know you're still there to support them.
- **Encourage self-care:** Remind them to take care of themselves during this tough time. Encourage them to prioritize their mental and physical health and provide activities or programs that can help them feel better.

Remember that everyone deals with grief differently. Be understanding and flexible. Also, the loss may have impacted you as well. Don't forget to take care of yourself too. It's ok for you to grieve as you navigate the loss.

## Recognizing When Professional Help is Needed

Determining whether grief requires professional help is a subjective assessment that depends on various factors, including the individual's personal circumstances, the intensity and duration of their grief symptoms, and the impact on their daily functioning. While grief is a natural and normal response to loss, there are situations where seeking professional help may be beneficial. Here are some indicators that professional help might be necessary:

- **Prolonged and intense grief:** Grief typically follows a natural progression and gradually lessens over time. However, if the intensity of grief remains consistently high or if the grieving process becomes prolonged, it may be a sign that professional help is needed. Persistent feelings of overwhelming sadness, despair, or hopelessness that interfere with daily life could indicate a more complicated form of grief.
- **Inability to perform daily activities:** If grief significantly impairs an individual's ability to carry out their usual responsibilities, such as going to work, taking care of personal hygiene, or fulfilling family obligations, it may be a sign that professional support is necessary. When grief becomes all-consuming and hinders normal functioning, seeking help can be beneficial.
- **Social withdrawal and isolation:** If a person withdraws from social interactions, avoids friends and family, or experiences a prolonged sense of isolation, professional assistance might be warranted. Grief can sometimes lead to a sense of detachment or disconnection from others, but when this persists and affects relationships and social support, seeking professional guidance can be helpful.
- **Intense guilt, self-blame, or suicidal thoughts:** Excessive guilt, self-blame, or persistent thoughts of self-harm or suicide are serious indicators that professional help is required. These emotions and thoughts can be harmful and should be addressed immediately by a mental health professional or through emergency services.
- **Substance misuse or self-destructive behavior:** If grief leads to an increase in substance misuse (e.g., drugs, alcohol) or the development of self-destructive behaviors, seeking professional assistance is crucial. These coping mechanisms can further compound the emotional distress and have detrimental effects on an individual's physical and mental health.
- **Pre-existing mental health conditions:** Individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, may be more vulnerable to experiencing complicated grief. In such cases, professional help should be sought to address the interplay between grief and the existing mental health condition.

Seeking professional help is a personal decision, but there is no shame in reaching out for support during times of grief. Mental health professionals, such as therapists, counselors, or psychologists, are trained to provide guidance, support, and appropriate interventions to help individuals navigate the grieving process.

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If a team member is in crisis or experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide, seek immediate help through:

- Your EAP provider,
- 24-Hour Crisis Line, 988, or <https://www.crisisconnections.org/24-hour-crisis-line/>, or
- The nearest emergency room, 911.