

When a Colleague is Grieving

Tragic, depressing and sad events impact everyone's life at one time or another. When misfortune impacts the life of a colleague or someone you supervise, you may not know the appropriate way to react. Should you offer assistance or provide a space and time to grieve? There is no right answer for every person and situation, but the following suggestions can help you determine an appropriate course of action for acknowledging a colleague's grief and offering your support.

Consider the Cause of the Grief

The first factor to consider is the cause. For example, the death of a loved one is always a cause of grief. However, the degree of sadness can vary depending on the relationship and closeness of the people involved. If a colleague's spouse or parent has died, the grief will probably be much greater than if it was a great aunt. But perhaps the colleague was raised by the great aunt or had a close relationship with her; understanding the nature of the relationship will help you determine an appropriate way to acknowledge and respond to grief.

Consider Where Your Colleague Is in the Grieving Process

There are five commonly accepted stages to grief. Determining where your colleague is in this continuum can help you fashion your response.

The five stages of grieving are:

Shock: Shock is the first, most immediate reaction to a traumatic event for many people. They often say they do not believe what has happened.

Anger: It is common for many people to experience feelings of rage and anger after a traumatic event. They may have a short temper and be prone to angry outbursts fueled by their emotions.

Bargaining: People often try to change or bargain with the situation that has caused them grief. They think that if they change something or promise to act differently, the situation that is causing their grief will change or become better. This is an attempt to rationalize a solution for situations that are not fixable.

Depression: Depression and apathy are feelings encountered throughout the grieving process. Many people may feel for a time that previously important things and actions are now meaningless.

Acceptance: Acceptance is the stage of grieving in which things seem to return to normal. The bereaved accept their situation, know that they cannot change it, and understand that they have to move on with their life and the new circumstance in which they are living.

A person in the shock or anger stage of grieving may not feel up to having a lengthy conversation with you because it is still too early in the grieving process, so offering a few brief words of support may be a better approach. Likewise, somebody in the depression or acceptance stage of grieving might be more willing or eager to talk, so offering only a few words of support or encouragement would probably be the wrong way to acknowledge or aid bereavement.



Consider the Nature of Your Relationship

The nature of your relationship with a colleague is a factor in how you acknowledge grief and bereavement. The amount and type of sympathy and support you would show someone you are very friendly with will differ greatly from what you would show with only a passing workplace acquaintance.

Perhaps you are very close with the colleague. You have had lunch together several times each month and talk considerably about things beyond the workplace. You will probably take a more in-depth approach to acknowledging his or her grief than you would for a colleague you may know in passing but with whom you have never really had any other interaction.

You may tell a close colleague to call you at home if he or she is feeling depressed, or offer to run an errand for her. You can offer more casual workplace acquaintances some simple words of acknowledgement, support and understanding. The extent of your kindness varies in degrees, but your words and actions of support in each case will be appreciated by the bereaved.

Consult Other Colleagues

Talking with other colleagues about how to respond to the grief a fellow colleague is often a positive experience. Other people in your workplace may have ideas on ways to aid, support and comfort the bereaved. Working together can also help eliminate any duplication of effort.

Many people choose to express their sympathy through group offerings of condolences or assistance. You and your colleagues might also work together to pick up the slack for someone who is going through a difficult time.

Offer Support

The eventual outcome of this process is an understanding of the situation your colleague is experiencing, culminating in an appropriate show of support for the individual and his or her family. Support can take many forms, such as:

- Simple spoken or written words of understanding and encouragement
- Maintaining your normal level of communication (do not shy away from close colleagues or become suddenly overly attentive to a casual acquaintance)
- Understanding a grieving person may not be capable of doing his or her best work at that moment
- Including the colleague in social events and plans
- Respecting their need for privacy or alone time
- Just being there for those who need someone to talk with
- Suggesting the Employee Assistance Program for services if he or she needs to talk with a professional therapist or grief counselor.

There is no timetable for how long grieving will last. All people experience, internalize and cope with tragic events in their own way and on their own schedule. But by providing an appropriate and caring show of support and empathy, you can greatly help grieving colleagues as they adapt to their new physical or emotional circumstances.



Resources

- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org
- The Compassionate Friends: www.compassionatefriends.org
- National Organization for Victim Assistance: www.trynova.org
- American Trauma Society: www.amtrauma.org

