

Coping with the Death of a Coworker

Our co-workers are very much like an extended family. We spend most of our waking hours with them, forging special bonds of trust and friendship that are unlike our other relationships.

So it's not surprising that a co-worker's death can sometimes be particularly difficult to deal with, particularly if you were close to that person, or if the death was sudden and tragic. You may also experience feelings of anxiety and guilt if the death occurred in the workplace, or your last interaction with the person was not pleasant. And even if the co-worker's death is the result of a prolonged illness, you may still experience shock and depression when the news arrives.

The Emotional Impact

How we cope with a loss depends on many factors, from our personal beliefs to the presence of other stressors in our lives. For some of us, thoughts of the deceased may make it hard to focus on our work for a short while. Others may find it difficult to get back on track, resulting in mistakes that, in turn, disrupt the organization's functioning.

In a production or manufacturing environment, preoccupation with a co-worker's death may present safety hazards for those operating equipment, performing intricate operations, or monitoring product quality. Similarly, a loss of concentration during your daily drive to and from work could easily lead to a crash.

In more extreme cases of stress, a co-worker's death may cause you to become tense and irritated, adding to what may already be a stressful work environment and creating new problems elsewhere in your life.

The Physical Impact

A strong emotional response to a co-worker's death can have a direct and often negative influence on your physical health. Long-term feelings of deep sadness can disrupt your eating and sleeping patterns, robbing you of the energy necessary to move on with your life. For those with arthritis, high-blood pressure, or other chronic health problems, even a brief deviation from prescribed diet, medication or exercise regimens can have serious consequences.

Prolonged grief frequently leads to depression, which has been linked to many other health concerns such as heart disease and stroke, obesity and eating disorders, diabetes, and some forms of cancer. Grief-related stress has also been shown to disrupt the immune system. Bacteria-fighting t-lymphocytes, or "t-cells," react more sluggishly, making the body more vulnerable to colds and infections.

Trying too hard not to think about a co-worker's death has its own consequences. Those who attempt to "lose themselves" in their work risk burnout, a state of intense mental and physical exhaustion that can cause cardio-vascular and neurological problems. Others may become dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs to cope with their sadness.

What you can do

Grief is a natural process that requires time. If you are having difficulty accepting a co-worker's death, a qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help you adjust to the loss. You may also find these suggestions helpful:

- Share your feelings. Your other co-workers may be experiencing the same feelings you are. Mutual support can help everyone get through the grieving process.
- Take advantage of Employee Assistance Programs, if available. Experienced counselors can offer the support and structure necessary to help individuals and groups come to terms with a loss and make appropriate plans for memorials, gestures of condolences to family members.
- Plan ahead. If you are a manager, work with your Human Resources specialists to establish protocols for responding to a worker's death. Issues to consider include sharing information, handling personal effects, allowing time off for funerals, and reassigning space or equipment.

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