

Your workmate needs your ongoing support

Sadly, many survivors lack support when they need it most – in the months after the death when ‘unreality’ gives way to acute pain. Be aware that much of your workmate’s support network may dissipate as people return to their own lives.

Be mindful of events that emphasise your workmate’s loss, such as Christmas, anniversaries, and other meaningful occasions. Your workmate is likely to experience his grief anew at such times, and will need your support and understanding.

For managers

If you are a manager, your support sets an example for others to follow, and helps to create a safe environment in which everyone feels valued and respected. If appropriate, mention your co-workers loss to the team and encourage them to offer help. You may wish to hand out copies of this brochure. Be thoughtful when allocating new tasks and assignments. Allow your colleague to take extra time off to attend to her grief, and make her aware of any in-company assistance that is available.

When you lose a co-worker

When a co-worker dies, everyone in the workplace faces grief. If you are a manager, you can be a source of comfort and reassurance to your team. The key is to share your experience of grief, and to encourage others to do the same.

As soon as possible after news of the death, stop the action at work and bring your team together. Send them a clear message of support, and give them an opening

to share their thoughts and feelings. You may wish to bring in a counsellor at this time. Over the days and weeks ahead, provide many opportunities to grieve – one chance isn’t enough. Encourage your team to attend the funeral, and to honour their co-worker in other ways. You could hold a memorial service, plant a tree on the grounds, or put a tribute in the paper.

Remember to nurture yourself at this time as you undertake your own healing process. Give yourself permission to mourn, and share your grief with those closest to you.

Know that death is a natural and permanent part of life, just as grief is a natural and permanent part of love. As life and love are to be embraced, so then must death and grief be experienced and shared. In sharing, we find the path to healing.

We offer this brochure as a means to convey our support. This brochure is not meant to replace the professional guidance of a psychologist or counsellor. As you move through this difficult time, please seek professional help if necessary.



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BEING THERE FOR
a colleague who is grieving



because *life* is important





Helping a grieving colleague in the workplace

When a workmate loses someone she loves you may feel helpless in the face of her grief. You may fear reaching out in case you say the wrong thing. We urge you not to hold back. You can be of great comfort and support to your workmate, particularly when she is just returning to work and in the weeks and months ahead. This brochure will guide you in the process.

Returning to work after loss

Your colleague may seek solace in work, finding comfort in a known, safe environment surrounded by his workmates. His work may take his mind away from grief, fulfil his need to do something constructive, and allow him to resume a regular routine – to feel “normal” for a while. Understand that while your workmate may not show outward signs of grief (mourning), this does not mean he is not experiencing grief. Embracing work is his way of coping. Let him know that you are glad to have him back.

Alternatively, your colleague may be overwhelmed at the prospect of returning to work and may need extra time off. He may even be tempted to give up his job out of fear of failure or to reduce the pressure. You can make him feel that it is okay to take more time. Tell him not to worry about his work while he is gone, that you will help take care of things for him.

Do not judge your colleague’s choices. Be compassionate when the impact of his loss shows itself – when he is tired, depressed, short tempered or lacking concentration. These are all natural responses to loss. Your workmate is doing the best he can.

It is important to acknowledge your workmate’s loss

Co-workers often withhold support from a bereaved colleague because they feel helpless or believe that grieving is best done alone. This leaves the bereaved feeling isolated, and deeply hurt that no one seems to care.

Acknowledging your workmate’s loss plays an important role in her return to work. When you first hear the news, join with your colleagues in sending flowers and a card. And if your colleague has lost an immediate family member do not be shy about attending the funeral, even if you did not know the person who died. Your co-worker will appreciate you being there.

Continue to reach out to your colleague at work. These words can bring great comfort – don’t be afraid to say them and act on them:

- I’m sorry.
- I’m sad for you.
- I’m here to listen.
- What can I do?
- Take all the time you need.
- Strive to understand your colleague’s challenges.

Those who have lost someone they love know that grief does not end. To heal is not to recover from grief but to learn to live with loss.

Your colleague’s journey through grief will take time as he adjusts to life without his loved one. Mourning is an essential part of his journey if he is to love and live wholly again. He cannot heal unless he openly expresses his grief, releasing it from his body and his psyche.

Your colleague will experience his emotions in waves or “pangs”, and these feelings are likely to occur unpredictably for months after the death. Be prepared for him to be overwhelmed by emotion at work. Understand that it takes effort and courage for him to leave his “old self” and “normal” life behind and make a commitment to the future.

Listen with compassion

When your workmate is ready to talk, the most supportive thing you can do is listen without judgement or expectation. Your workmate is not looking for suggestions or advice – no one can fix what has happened. What she needs is for you to simply be there.

You may feel confronted talking about death as it brings you face-to-face with your own fears and beliefs at this time. Don’t feel you must have answers. Be open to the experience – learn as you share your workmate’s journey through grief.

At all times, avoid clichés such as “time will heal”. These words do not help – they diminish your colleague’s loss, and deny her need to grieve.

Offer practical help

There are many practical ways you can help a grieving workmate, taking on some of his tasks for example, or offering lifts to and from work.