

# Supervisors Can Help Ease Employees' Grief

*Mourning doesn't have to be an awkward topic.*

Why do we have so much trouble comforting colleagues who've suffered a loss?

One reason is we're afraid of death, and when it touches a colleague, it's a reminder of our own mortality. Because death is such a taboo subject, we aren't sure what to say when we're faced with a grieving person. Coworkers who'll freely discuss intimate relationships become tongue-tied for fear of saying the wrong thing.



So they do nothing. And, sadly, this is the worst choice, because it sends a message that they don't care. Imagine how you'd feel if your parent died, and nobody at the office where you've worked for years said anything about the loss.

Blunders such as these are costly, personally and professionally. It's particularly important that supervisors are knowledgeable about the grief process and show sensitivity and compassion for the bereaved. Most workers feel that bosses, rather than a company policy, set the tone for a workplace response to grief.

Here are some key points for supervisors:

**Communicate.** Notifying staff is critical. Managers who learn about a death in a coworker's family should ask permission to notify colleagues and of any information the family wishes to disclose (passing along the importance of resisting the urge to probe for details). You may want to designate a person to disseminate information about memorial services.

Why should you avoid leaving notification to the grapevine? Picture this lunchroom scene that was recently described to me: A person tells a colleague who's been off on maternity leave, "So show us the baby pictures" - only to learn that there are none, the newborn died.

**Acknowledge the loss.** It's important to personally acknowledge the death has occurred. This can be a simple "I'm sorry," a handwritten note on a desk or flowers. It shows you care about your colleague as a person. Also, permit coworkers to attend the funeral, organize whatever company support is available and arrange for flowers or other appropriate acknowledgment from the office as a whole. These gestures are never forgotten.

One young woman told me how much it meant to see so many people at the service for her younger sister. Another said, "Take off work, even if you're busy, and go to the funeral. It just means an awful lot to look out and see how many people cared about the person you loved, and care about you."



Allegheny County Schools  
Health Insurance Consortium

LYTLE EAP PARTNERS  
*Well-being at work*

**Understand grief.** Supervisors tend to impose unspoken deadlines for healing. But it's important to understand that grief is rarely neat and tidy. Be patient, and give your colleague the time needed to get better. Understanding that a colleague will experience the stages of grief - denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance—will help in finding ways to be supportive.

Remember that returning to work doesn't mean the grieving process is over. We all grieve in our own way, in our own time. Grief over the loss of a loved one can hit with such staggering force the ability to work is altered for months or years. In some cases, a grieving worker may find solace in returning to work and appear almost normal for a while, only to fall deeper into grief months later.

**Be flexible.** Communicate with team members about what has happened and figure out ways to share the load until the grieving person returns to full strength. One supervisor I spoke with gets the team together and explains the need to compensate for a member who's grieving, to be sensitive about work demands and to understand it will take time for the person to get back to full productivity.

Ease the workload for grieving colleagues, so they can go home early or offer time off when colleagues are too grief stricken to be effective. Failure to allow extra time can detract from employees' long-term productivity. One grieving person told me going back to work too soon rendered her incapable of giving the job the attention it required. Another person said, "It would have been nice if they had trusted me to come in and do the essentials, then leave when I needed to."

As a supervisor, you may feel torn between showing compassion and protecting the bottom line. As difficult as it may be to disrupt work schedules or put extra burdens on coworkers, the alternative can be worse.

Denying an employee compassion and adequate time to grieve may complicate and slow the healing process. That's a sure prescription for rendering an effective worker incapable, in addition to risking the loss of a productive and loyal employee.

Feel free to utilize the resources of your Employee Assistance Program. They can help you as a manager develop a plan to communicate with the workplace. The EAP can also help the employee impacted by the loss and co-workers for whom the co-workers loss may trigger their own feeling about grief and loss.

**Call 800-327-7272 for confidential assistance.**

**[www.lytleeap.com](http://www.lytleeap.com)**

**Password - acshic**



Allegheny County Schools  
Health Insurance Consortium

**LYTLE EAP PARTNERS**  
*Well-being at work*