



COPING WITH LOSS IN THE WORKPLACE

SOME TIPS FOR MANAGERS

Balancing human needs and those of the organisation are most difficult when serious illness or death enters the workplace.

Flexibility and communication are the keys to successfully balancing your managerial responsibilities and desire for compassion. Every office and its culture are unique, but one thing is certain: the company's attitude and actions, and the example the manager sets, are critical. They determine not only how the staff react to the immediate situation, but the long-term impact on the company.

IF AN EMPLOYEE DIES

People who work together are like an extended family, and when a "family member" dies, co-workers grieve. Understanding the feelings and symptoms of grief can help you manage yourself, and your staff, during this difficult time.

THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to manifest and evolve. People don't heal on a timetable, but over time the emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. Experts describe the feelings, symptoms and outcomes of grief in various ways.

Broadly speaking, the feelings and symptoms of grief may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and concentration difficulties.

Some outcomes of grief may include: finding a new balance (which doesn't necessarily mean that things will be the same) and growth (readiness to move ahead with one's life.)

Some people experience the feelings of grief in this order. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. Over time as the person works through their grief, their emotions become less intense, and they begin to find a new balance in their life. The extent, depth, and duration of the feelings will also depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and their own situation. For example, a sudden, unexpected death can be particularly difficult.

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Give employees the opportunity to grieve.

When the person dies, inform the staff immediately. Allow them time to attend the funeral. Small office? Hire a temporary to answer phones so that **all** who wish to attend may. Help employees channel their immediate and ongoing grief. Some things they can do:

- Create a memorial board. This acknowledges the loss but allows the work to proceed.
- Hold or participate in a fund-raiser for a special cause or for the family of the deceased.
- Create a book of memories to give to the family. Many people are not aware of the work-life of people they love. These will be unique memories for the family — and a way for staff to privately express their feelings and memories.
- Conduct a workplace-only event. An employee-only service or even a luncheon can give the staff an opportunity to talk openly about their co-worker.

Be aware that the death will affect employee productivity and motivation.

When a co-worker dies, the often un-emotional work world is suddenly out of our control. “It can’t happen to me” just happened to the person in the next office. Expect some loss of productivity, motivation, and mistakes, especially from people close to the deceased.

WHEN AN EMPLOYEE SUFFERS A LOSS

Managers more frequently encounter a situation in which an employee loses a parent, spouse, long-time companion, close relative, or even a child. Typical work policies may allow up to two days off — or a week if the death is of a spouse or child. The effects and impact of the loss do not end after this time. The grief may not affect work permanently, but can manifest itself over a period of time. As a manager, you need to be concerned about the immediate situation, and the long-term effect on your staff person.

Ask the grieving employee what information about the loss they would like communicated and to whom.

Set an example

Many people are often afraid to say the “wrong thing,” or are so fearful of death that they shy away from someone who has suffered a loss. A personal call or note from you is appropriate to express condolences, as are office-wide flowers or a card. Doing and/or saying nothing says a lot about your company’s concern for employees.

JOB PERFORMANCE AND GRIEF

The initial reaction to death is often shock and denial. Lack of motivation, mistakes, confusion, and an inability to concentrate are all “symptoms” of grief. A grieving employee will not be fully functional, and performance may be below normal standards for weeks.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Ask the employee what you can do to help relieve some of the work stress he or she may be feeling.

If performance consistently continues to lag, you have the right — and the obligation, as the manager — to raise your concerns with the bereaved person. Some signals that the person who has suffered a loss may be experiencing difficult grief include:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Indications the person is not sleeping or eating.
- Changes in personal habits, i.e. clothing, hygiene, coming to work, going home.
- Inability to work. The person may continue to be distracted, be overly absorbed, or make repeated mistakes.
- Attitude problems. A normally calm person may be angry; an aggressive person suddenly becomes passive. Conflicts with staff may also escalate. Note: the employee who has suffered a major loss such as the loss of a spouse or child, yet seems to show no symptoms of grief and acts as though nothing has happened, may be more at risk than one who shows these emotions.

Be prepared to offer counselling/EAP resources, information on support groups and some suggested reading materials to the bereaved employee. **Refer the person to your Employee assistance programme (EAP).**

Suggest places that offer support outside the office environment.

Many organisations throughout the community offer bereavement support services.

Remember, death is hard to discuss — but facing it and the grief it causes will help you and your staff survive these difficult times.

Arrange for training for Staff/Supervisors/Managers on recognising signs and symptoms of stress, looking after yourself and others.

A death in the workplace takes a huge toll on people obviously affecting performance and production.

The effects of grief can go on for years. Recognising the effects in self and others in a timely way will reduce further absenteeism, sickness and potential LTIS.

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TIME LINE OF SUPPORT

Incident Occurs

- On scene support
 - establish area for people to talk to Counsellor/Tea and coffee available.

- Family Notification
 - Support offered to family.
 - EAP follow up as required.
 - Visibility at funeral by Workplace Management.

- Workplace
 - Numbers available for EAP and other support.
 - Brochures available.
 - 24 hr Management Assistance for Staff/Key Persons.
 - 24 hr Counsellors.
 - Training to staff and key persons on identifying related human factor issues in self and others. E.g. What happens at different stages and time periods and how to help them at each stage.
 - Critical Incident Defusing for those immediately affected by the incident. When possible, this needs to be done within 96 hours. This is different to counselling and is not always necessary. The Critical Incident Stress Manager needs to make a judgment call on this.
 - Critical Incident Debrief. Only when there is obvious impact on individuals to the stage that it is having a great effect on their personal or work life.

- Ongoing factors
 - Memorials.
 - 12 month anniversary.
 - Contact by EAP at certain time stages by phone or face to face. Certain people immediately affected by the incident should be told to expect contact by an Incident Counsellor. Often nothing more than a call is needed. For a few however, this will be invaluable and very cost effective. Some individuals believe they are bullet proof and don't need assistance. Critical Incident Stress Management practice has found that we can take the stigma out of seeking support if people are notified to expect a call. Issues can be picked up quickly in the early stages that may otherwise have huge impact and cost on the workplace later.
 - There are of course other issues to keep in mind which vary from incident to incident. You should stay in contact with your Incident Manager to stay in touch with these changes or other assistance that may be required. Generally, it is far more cost efficient and productive to assist early even when we are uncertain if it may be required than to not recognise issues that can break down later.

For further information contact EASA Employee Assistance on 0407 111 003