

When Someone We Work With is Grieving

Loss and grief are normal yet difficult parts of life. If you are the manager, co-worker or even direct report of someone who's grieving, there might be ways in which you feel uncomfortable or unprepared. What do you say or not say? How can you be emotionally supportive? What do you do when your heart goes out to someone, yet the burden of the workload is falling too much to others?

Here are some guidelines to help you at this sensitive time:

1) Definitions

First, it might be helpful to understand the difference between some of the different terms related to loss and grief:

Grief: the internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. This can encompass a wide range of experiences, but common elements can include disbelief, yearning, anger, sadness and acceptance.

Grief reactions: can include sleep/appetite disturbances, absentmindedness, disinterest in previously enjoyed activities, sense of the presence of deceased person, questioning spiritual beliefs, emotional reactions (relief, numbness, helplessness, self-reproach, sadness, guilt)

Complicated grief: a prolonged and/or pathological grieving process that causes a disruption in social or work life; occurs in 10-20% of survivors. The risk of complicated grief can be increased by a traumatic death, a death with uncontrolled suffering, an unexpected death, or a history of mental health and/or substance use disorder.

Mourning: the process of taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outwardly. In addition to individual factors, mourning is influenced by cultural customs, rituals and social rules about coping with a loss.

Bereavement: the period after a loss during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs. This period can be influenced by how attached the person was to the person who died (not necessarily a label to the relationship, i.e. brother vs. cousin), the circumstances of the death, and the person's other coping mechanisms and support.

2) Tips on What to Say and Not Say

Consider saying:

"I'm so sorry to hear about (name the specific loved one or loss)." instead of "I'm so sorry for your loss." Of course if you don't know the name, the latter is fine. You can even add, "What was your (mother's, sister's, cousin's, etc.) name?"

"I'm glad you're back, please know I'm here for you."

"Can I do (name a specific task or responsibility that you can do for them today)?" Being specific gives the employee the opportunity to say yes or no or "I'd rather you do x."

"How do you feel about being at work right now?" If they say, "I'm glad to be here" you might say, "I'm really glad it's helpful for you to be here." If they say, "I wish I didn't have to be here" you can empathize with them by saying, "I'm sorry, it must be really hard."

"How are you today?" is better than just "How are you?" It encourages people to answer honestly instead of the standard "I'm fine."

Try to Avoid Saying:

“Time heals everything.” While it might feel true to you, this can feel trivializing to the current grief the person is experiencing.

“This was part of God’s plan.” Unless you’re close to the person and have heard them express that this belief is currently bringing them comfort, this phrase can make people angry, especially if they don’t consider themselves religious or even spiritual. And even if they sometimes believe this, they might not be right now, with this particular loss, at this particular time.

“Look at what you have to be thankful for.” Chances are, they know that they have things to be thankful for, but right now, they need to be allowed the emotions related to their loss.

“They are in a better place now.” Again, unless you already know for certain that this is the grieving person’s belief and it’s currently bringing them comfort, they may or may not believe this, either in general or currently. It’s better to keep your beliefs to yourself, unless asked.

“Let me know if there is something I can do for you.” By asking the employee this question, you’re placing the responsibility on the person who’s grieving, to reach out for help. What would be more helpful is to offer specific ways you feel able to take something off their plate.

Any statements that begin with, “You should...” or “You will...” We can’t know what someone who’s grieving “should” do, since everyone grieves differently. Instead, if a person has a question about something (e.g. questions that come from them that begin with “How do I...” or “How can I...”), you can ask “Have you thought about...” or “Might you try?...”

“You’re handling this better than I expected.” The employee’s outward expressions may not match their internal feelings.

“This is behind you now and you should be getting on with your life.” The grieving process is very individual and often goes in cycles. It’s not appropriate to put a time stamp on it.

Anything that begins with, “At least...” This minimizes the person’s loss.

3) Cultural Diversity

Different cultures and religions respond to death and approach mourning in significantly different ways. If unsure of how to respond to a bereaved employee from a different culture or religion than your own, it is best to ask someone else who is of that culture or religion, who may have perspective about what’s appropriate. If no surrogate is available, it’s better to ask the grieving employee than to assume or guess about this.

4) Offering Support/When Additional Support is Required

We all wish to be empathetic with those we work with, and at the same time, might be concerned about the need for the job to get done. How do we find the right balance?

Offering Support:

- It’s a good idea to start with some of the “what to say” statements, above.
- Acts of kindness, i.e. in the form of meals, or removal of obstacles/tasks are often appreciated, especially when they do not require a request from or work of the bereaved.
- Old fashioned cards and notes in addition to “just thinking of you” texts or emails, can also be useful and appreciated.
- Consider organizing support through an online app or service such as lotsahelpinghands.com or carecalendar.org.

- Respect the boundaries of the person who is grieving.

In addition to it being important to respect the grieving person's boundaries, it's helpful to be aware of our own need for boundaries, as we empathize. The following can help:

- a) Sometimes people think they shouldn't "turn off their feelings" when at work because that's engaging in denial, ignoring, or disrespecting the memory of the loved one. However, turning feelings "on work mode" when on duty and "off work mode" when not, is actually a useful coping strategy. It allows for protection from being overwhelmed while working, and receiving or offering support at a later time.
- b) We can verbalize this intent to switch on and off. For example, we might say after checking in first thing in the morning, "Don't worry, I won't ask you all day long how you're doing, I know that might make it harder rather than provide comfort. Just know I'm thinking of you."
- c) We can develop habits or rituals that help with the "turn off, turn on" transitions. For example, taking a couple deep breaths might be helpful, or taking a few sips of a cup of coffee or tea.

When Additional Support is Required:

Most people don't require professional counseling to effectively cope with their grief. However, watch for warning signs of "complicated grief" such as poor grooming, severe withdrawal, substance use, inability to perform work tasks, or uncharacteristic behaviors. If you observe signs of "complicated grief," it's important that you have a confidential conversation with your manager/supervisor or your HRSS so that the grieving employee might be offered one or more forms of additional support, and the workplace is kept safe for all.

5) How Long Will Support Be Needed

It's important to recognize that grief in an individual will have a personal timeline, and effects of grief may not be outwardly noticeable. After the early days or weeks have passed, you might want to check in on the grieving employee periodically (i.e. 3-month intervals). Continue to monitor for and respond to warning signs of complicated grief as described above. You might consider placing a calendar marker for check-in points; be sure to include holidays or the anniversary of the loss, as these sometimes trigger a new wave of grief.

6) Health and Safety of Everyone

Managers need to pro-actively consider the potential impact of grief reactions on the employee in the context of their specific duties/ workplace environments. Efforts need to be made where possible to reduce stressors and foster resilience. While productivity is to be expected, expectations need to be reasonable. When an employee is in the initial stages of grief, they are not likely to be "at the top of their game."

When possible, a manager might speak with their HRSS about the possibility of offering temporary changes in responsibilities. When a manager observes, or has reported to them, signs of "complicated grief" as described above, they are to consult with their supervisor and HRSS.

7) Special Considerations Related to Covid-19

In light of the COVID 19 Pandemic and needs for physical distancing, many mourners are experiencing a new grief. There are restrictions on visiting, and perhaps an inability to follow through on the wishes of the person who died. Religious rituals that may have given the person comfort, currently can not take place.

Given that there may be a large number of employees who are mourning the passing of loved ones due to this pandemic, the Dept. of Spiritual Care and Mindfulness will consider holding an interfaith memorial service for any employee who wishes to attend, once physical distancing precautions are lifted. In the event of the loss of an employee, a virtual (or at a later date, in-person) "Sharing of Memories" will be offered to the employee's department. If appropriate, that department's leadership will invite others to attend as well.