

A COWORKER'S DEATH

In our culture, death is not often discussed. So when someone we work with dies, we may find ourselves unsure of how we should feel or act. Here are some answers to questions you may have concerning a co-worker's death.

Q: A man I worked with died recently, and now I feel confused, disoriented and depressed. Is this normal?

A: Yes, you're experiencing grief, and rightly so. Full-time workers usually spend more time with their co-workers than with their friends or even families. A co-worker can become a significant person in your life. Whenever you lose someone important, you grieve.

Q: How will grief affect me?

A: Grief is highly individual. How you grieve depends on your relationship with your co-worker, your age, your sex-role conditioning, your religious beliefs, your previous experience with grief and a number of other factors. No one can tell you how you will, or should experience grief.

However, there are common reactions to the death of someone close, and you should expect to experience some of them. You may already have felt shock. Later, the shock may dissolve into numbness. You may feel that nothing has actually happened – you and your other co-workers may find yourselves saying, "I still can't believe Bill is gone. It doesn't seem real." This is nature's way of insulating you, of giving you time to slowly accept what has happened.

You may feel angry or whatever or whomever you believe caused your co-worker's death. You may be angry with the doctors or nurses who couldn't save your co-worker, with your company for "working him too hard," or with God. If you believe your co-worker's death was caused by poor health habits or carelessness, you may even feel angry at him or her for dying and leaving you – and then feel guilty for this anger.

Q: So co-workers ever feel guilty?

A: You may feel guilty for a number of reasons. You may believe you somehow should have prevented the death. "I should have insisted Joe see a doctor about that cough," you may say to yourself, or "I should have been there to prevent that accident."

If you and your co-worker had disagreements – as almost all people do who are together often, you may now feel guilty about them. Minor events, such as turning

down an invitation for an afterwork drink the day before your co-worker died, can become stinging memories in the face of death.

Q: I find myself thinking a lot about the man who died. Is this unusual?

A: It's common to become preoccupied with the one who died. You may think about the person constantly, re-create the circumstances of the death over and over in your mind, have dreams or nightmares about your co-worker, you may even think you see or hear the person. It's important to realize that, as bizarre as they may seem, these reactions are normal.

Since most working people are under age 65, chances are you co-worker's death seemed unfair and untimely. As a result, you may feel vulnerable, frightened and depressed, especially if you are in the same age group as your co-worker.

The mental strain of grief can take a physical toll as well. It's not unusual for the bereaved to lose weight, have difficulty sleeping, become irritable or listless, or feel short of breath.

Q: How can I cope with my grief?

A: First you must recognize that grief is necessary, and that it is something you must work through; there is no shortcut. It's important that you ventilate your feelings. Take time to cry, and don't be afraid to share your tears with other co-workers. Talk openly with family members and friends about your co-worker's death. Express your anger if you are feeling it. Lean on your friends.

Try to lighten your schedule a bit. Set aside some quiet times just for yourself, so you can think about your co-worker's death and put things in perspective. There is no timetable for grief, but if you are worried that you aren't handling your grief, you might consider getting professional help. You may be relieved to discover that you are reacting normally. If you believe you need help, ask your funeral director, clergyman or doctor to suggest a counsellor.

Q: I've never met my co-worker's family. Should I go to her funeral?

A: By all means go. Visitations and funerals as an important focus for your grief, which will help you accept the death and begin the process of healing. Funerals also bring together those who cared about the deceased for mutual support. Your co-worker's grieving family will probably appreciate your presence.

Q: What should I say when I greet my co-worker's family?

A: Just say “I’m sorry”. If you know them well, let them know you’re willing to help in any way you can. Don’t try to come up with a profound statement about death – grieving people don’t want to hear philosophy.

Q: A member of the department I manage just died. How should I tell the other staff members?

A: Don’t send a memo – tell them in person. It’s a good idea to call the co-workers of the deceased together in a conference room or rest area and tell them. That way, they can leave immediately if they want to, or sit for a little while and talk. Don’t drift into each person’s office or cubicle and tell him or her – you won’t know how long to stay.

Q: Some of my staffers were close to the deceased, and I’m sure they’re going to be very upset. How should I handle this?

A: Just tell them you’re sorry, and that you’re available if they feel like talking. If possible, offer them the rest of the day off – they need time to get over the initial shock.

Q: Should the company hold some kind of remembrance?

A: That’s a good idea. The people who worked with the deceased will probably appreciate a forum to express their feelings and to remember their co-worker. In any case, the company should in some way acknowledge the worker’s death. Otherwise, the employees will think, “This company doesn’t care about us.”

Q: How can I help my staff member’s family?

A: First, go to the funeral and offer your regrets. Then do whatever you can to help them with any financial matters that involve your company, such as insurance policies, workers’ compensation forms and employment records.

Finally, give them any personal effects that your staff member kept at work. Don’t throw anything out; to a grieving family, something as inconsequential as a desk calendar with your staff member’s handwriting on it may be a valuable treasure.