

Coping with Your Grief in the Workplace

Death is an intimate, personal experience. Having to go back to work, often very soon following the death of a loved one, can be overwhelming and difficult.

We wonder how we will cope with all our co-workers asking questions, and how we will possibly focus on doing our job?

Below are some tools to help those returning to their workplace under the strain of their grief:

1. **Be Your Real Self**: Dealing with death is unspeakably difficult, and many of us may be unfamiliar with how to cope with the feelings that arise. Give yourself the permission and space to experience your feelings, to let your feelings take their natural course, to cry, and to accept the emotions that you need to let out. You can't pretend that everything is okay...everything is not okay. Pretending otherwise doesn't honour your experience, or the memory of your loved one.
2. **Breathe**: When we're grieving, we tend to breathe in short, shallow breaths without even realizing it. Sometimes we're afraid of breathing for fear that all the emotions we are hiding (bottling up) inside will come spilling out all at once. Breathing is a powerful message to the body and brain that we are safe, and that everything is okay. Give yourself time and room to breathe by creating regular breaks to get up from your desk, stretch, walk around, grab a coffee, and just breathe. Four deep breaths in (to the count of 4), exhaling each also to a count of 4, will reset your brain synapses and literally make you feel physically a little bit better.
3. **Connect**: Remember that you are not alone. Several people surrounding you, such as friends, family members and co-workers, have also experienced loss, and quite possibly, very similar pain to what you're experiencing right now. If comfortable doing so, be open and honest with your community. You may be surprised to discover the community of support around you who are willing to help you grieve.
4. **Be Patient**: The grieving process is a slow one, filled with ups and downs, and overwhelming emotions. Be tender and gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to take whatever time is needed for you to heal. Remember that this amount of time is different for everyone. You're not on a clock, and there is no truth to the thought that you should be finished grieving within a certain period of time.
5. **Nurture**: Your feelings are important and they matter. Often, the time prior to the passing of a loved one is spent caring for them. After their death, we are expected to

rush back to work, and get right back into the usual routine of our busy lives. This can leave us feeling overwhelmed and stressed. It is important to take time to nurture yourself ~ exercise, meditation, sleeping, eating well ~ are all necessary for you and your body to function, (even if you do not feel like taking care of yourself). Your loved one would probably want you to be cared for, well taken care of, and healthy.

6. Forgive People for Their Responses: Don't be surprised if things feel a little awkward upon your arrival back to work. People can be kind and supportive, but often struggle with finding the 'right' thing to say. You know that there actually isn't a 'right' thing to be said... but they don't. People often don't know how to speak to someone who has lost a loved one, and they very often don't know what words to use to express their condolences. Try to recognize that they are trying their best to be supportive, even if it comes out sounding a little insensitive. Sometimes people are afraid to address the elephant in the room, for fear of reminding you of your loss. They don't understand that it's not possible to 'remind' someone of their loss (it's not as if you forgot). Feel free to bring up your loss, to talk about it. The power of "acknowledgement"; the power of "we"; helps us feel less alone, and reminds us that others can help with our grief.
7. Find a Quite Place to Retreat: As you may already be aware, (and if not, expect it), grief comes in waves. You may be fine one minute, and the next you feel as if you're going to have an emotional outburst that will be unable to stop. For these times when you just need to let it out, it's worthwhile to have a place that you can temporarily retreat to if necessary. Sometimes we just need a good cry, and the last place we want to break down is in the middle of a crowded room.
8. Wanting to Return to Work: Some people may wish to return to work as a distraction. It helps them get through a big part of their day; it helps financially; and it can be a fulfilling part of their life. For some, when one thing falls apart, they don't want something else to fall apart as well. Going back to work helps some people 'live through their day'. If others pass judgement that you have returned to work too soon, (or not soon enough), please remember, only you know the best time for you to return to work.
9. Realistic Expectations: Perhaps it may take time for you to 'get back to your normal self'. Your focus may be off, your patience thinner than normal, your attention span short, your concentration decreased. At first, instead of managing many tasks, perhaps you can barely manage one. Not only can productivity, creativity and motivation wane, but you may frequently be late or absent from work. If your manager and colleagues know of the loss, they can be mindful that you may not be your normal self for many months.

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