

Death of a Co-Worker

A sudden death or terminal illness can be a shock and deep loss to any of us, both in our personal lives and in the workplace. When a co-worker dies suddenly or becomes terminally ill, the dynamics of our work place can be greatly affected. We probably have spent many hours with that person and consider him/her not just a co-worker but also a friend. Death of a co-worker can touch people's feelings about their work and workplace, their own lives, and their own fears about death and dying. When the death is unexpected, as from violence, accident, suicide, or sudden terminal illness, it can be even more traumatic to the co-workers who did not have a chance to say good-bye.

Considerations for Grief at Work:

People experience grief differently -- Sadness, irritability, decreased concentration, and fatigue can all be a part of normal grief reactions. However, everyone is an individual and how they respond will vary greatly. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or tend to cope differently.

Grief triggers -- People are often surprised by the feelings they have related to a co-worker's death. A close colleague's death can sometimes trigger memories of previous losses in your life, as well as fears of your own mortality.

Find support -- Talking to a family member, trusted friend, member of the clergy or a trained professional might be useful. Reading about the grief process may help with understanding your own reactions.

Patience -- The way you are feeling now will change. Give yourself and your co-workers time to adjust to the loss.

Self-care -- Be kind to yourself and try to focus on the basics of eating healthy, getting enough sleep, exercising, and using positive self-talk.

Work goes on -- At some point the co-worker's work area will need to be cleared and it may be modified and the position filled. Be prepared for reactions such as anger and renewed sadness. Remember that the co-worker isn't being replaced; no one can take the place of that person, it is only the position that is being filled.

Other options:

Consider attending the funeral or memorial service -- This is of course a highly individual decision.

Shared events with coworkers -- An informal activity, such as going to lunch together, viewing pictures, and sharing co-worker memories might also help.

Expressing condolences -- A card, flowers or some other expression to the family members of the deceased may be appreciated and help you feel better.

The Employee Service Program -- If you would like to talk with a Counselor, or get additional grief information and resources, you can contact the State of Michigan Employee Service Program at (517) 284-0137 in Lansing, or (313) 456-4020 in Detroit, or statewide at (800) 521-1377. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., closed on State holidays. Contact with the Employee Service Program is confidential.