

Propel HR MANAGER'S GUIDE

Coping with Loss in the Workplace

The loss of a coworker can be very traumatic and have a strong impact on the workplace. It is often difficult to know how to handle the situation and what to say to offer comfort for the grief stricken.

Everyone deals with grief differently. Managers need to be flexible and understanding when responding to employee emotions. Acknowledging an employee's feelings is important, as is allowing adequate time to grieve and move through the healing process. Look for opportunities to sit down with an employee and simply ask how they are doing and allow them to talk openly.

Some emotions employees may be experiencing:

- Denial
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Shock
- Sadness
- Yearning
- Anger
- Humiliation
- Despair
- Guilt

In addition to these emotions, some employees may experience physical symptoms such as stomach pain, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbances. These are all normal and common reactions to loss.

When dealing with a loss, reactions are influenced by the circumstances of the death, particularly when it is sudden or accidental. Reactions are also influenced by the closeness of the relationship to the person who has died.

A loss due to suicide can be among the most difficult losses to bear. They leave survivors with a tremendous burden of guilt, anger and shame. Survivors may even feel responsible for the death. Counseling during the first weeks after the suicide is particularly beneficial and advisable.

For Your Information:

- People who want to kill themselves are "suicidal" only for a limited period of time. Unsuccessful suicide attempt are most often a cry for help.
- As many as 80% of all completed suicides occurred after previous attempts. This is especially true for young people.
- People might think it's safer not to talk about suicide with someone considering it. On the contrary, talking will help them deal with some of the heavy issues involved and diffuse the tension.
- Males between the ages of 18 and 24 have the highest risk of attempting suicide.

Things to remember in dealing with the death of an employee:

- Give employees an opportunity to talk about what happened, regardless of what kind of death it was.
- Listen intently; without interrupting or judging.
- Create an executive's statement of concern and support and distribute to all employees.
- Create a learning environment. Offer materials that describe the stages and common reactions.
- If possible, bring in outside help through an employee assistance program or counselor.
- Be alert to potential for increased injury or accidents because employees are preoccupied.
- Be flexible – allow employees to attend funeral services and do anything else necessary to help employees deal with their grief.
- Be patient – don't expect grieving to stop immediately after the funeral services.
- Be supportive, but avoid giving advice.

It may also be helpful for the staff to deal with the grief together. Here are some suggestions:

- Provide an organizational, office or team "moment of silence"
- Take up a collection for the family
- Plant a tree on site and/or organize activities in remembrance

Owners and managers may want to return to business as usual, but it is important to remember that the adjustment to shifted workloads, new responsibilities, and/or new employees may be difficult for those grieving and will take time. Providing opportunities for employees to manage the range of emotions and reactions helps them move forward. Maintain a positive and supportive environment and employees will be encouraged to return to being productive and focus on their jobs.

If you have questions regarding this guide, please feel free to contact Propel HR at (864) 271-7611 or (800) 446-6567.