

When an Employee Is Grieving

On the April afternoon my daughter Maya was declared brain dead after a fall from a horse, my supervisor and another middle manager came to the hospital. I will always remember their courage and their support. They sat with my stunned family and asked: "What can we do? How can we help?"

Five days later the same managers and dozens of my co-workers from the corporate communications department of our company attended Maya's memorial service. They donated money to support youth programs at our church in her memory and contributed to a memorial scholarship in her name at the college she had attended. The CEO of the company sent me a personal note.

The compassionate response of managers at this Fortune 500 company was crucial to my recovery from a devastating loss. For the two years after Maya's death in 1992 it was all I could do to survive, let alone function productively. My managers responded with flexibility and support, offering an extended six-week bereavement leave, Employee Assistance counseling, flexible hours and telecommuting. Now, seven years later, I realize how fortunate I was. All too frequently, grief-stricken employees are expected back on the job in three days and there is little understanding of how much time and struggle are involved in recovery from loss.

A balanced approach

Job performance and morale can suffer if managers are not educated about grief and prepared to respond, according to bereavement therapist Robert Zucker, MA. Founder and director of Caring Communities Respond, a New England consortium that offers bereavement counseling, consultation and training, Zucker works with companies to help them understand and deal with the impact of grief in the workplace.

The key, he believes, is for supervisors to balance the emotional needs of grief-stricken employees with the work demands of their organizations. But to attempt this, supervisors need to learn more about the grieving process. Bereaved employees typically suffer a range of symptoms from an inability to concentrate to severe depression and mood swings. (See below.)

"Initially, bereaved employees are likely to be very anxious," Zucker points out. "They feel as if their lives have been ripped apart, and they don't know if they can handle it. Supervisors and co-workers form an important support system. So it is very important for supervisors to model a compassionate response."

Some specific actions supervisors can take

- Purchase a sympathy card, write a personal message, and pass it around the office.
- Hold a meeting with the entire workgroup to brainstorm ways to help.
- Talk with the employee before he returns to work to help ease reentry.
- Become familiar with the stages of grief and help educate employees by providing access to brochures or materials from your Employee Assistance Program.
- Work with the bereaved employee to renegotiate work expectations and set up regular times to check in on progress. Provide ongoing structure and support.
- If company policy allows, offer the option to telecommute or shift to flexible hours. Some employees who have suffered complicated losses may need to work half time, job share or take a leave of absence. Be flexible!
- Second-wave grief can be overwhelming. Encourage the employee to get support through counseling, bereavement support groups, or from clergy members.

"Remember that the grieving process will not debilitate the employee forever," Zucker says. "It will deepen her—a profound learning process is occurring."

Employees who experience a compassionate response to their situation often become intensely loyal. And co-workers who observe supervisors providing a well-informed, flexible response to grief can be positively affected as well, Zucker notes.

Phases of grief

1. Impact. We grapple with what has happened often by denying it and becoming numb or frozen in order to function. We test to see if we have the internal strength to cope and the outside resources to support us. Can last for weeks or months.

2. Second wave/recoil. When the numbness and denial wear off, it's like a slap in the face. Our preconceptions about grief are shattered. Profound rage, guilt and anxiety, as well as sadness, often overwhelm us. The pattern of emotions is unpredictable and can include a complete loss of purpose and meaning. Bereaved employees are at risk of suicide, depression and drug and alcohol abuse. This often lasts for a year or more; for complicated cases, two or three years of recovery may be needed.

3. Accommodation. Second wave intensity begins to diminish as we attempt to create meaning despite what happened. We try to figure out how we can bring the relationship with the deceased into the future with us. We focus on clarifying new values and often find meaning through service to others. This phase is a lifelong emotional challenge.

Resources

Books and articles

Coping With Workplace Change: Dealing With Loss and Grief by J. Shepperd Jeffreys, Ed.D. Crisp Publications, 1995.

"Grief at Work: New Challenges, New Opportunities" by Robert Zucker, chapter from *Living With Grief: At Work, At School, At Worship*. Hospice Foundation of America, 1999.

The Courage to Grieve by Judy Tattlebaum. Harper & Row, 1980.

The Grief Recovery Handbook by John W. James and Frank Cherry, Harper & Row, 1988.

The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide by Juliet Cassuto Rothman, Continuum Publishing, 1997.

Bereavement support

Grief Recovery Help Line
(818) 907-9600

A free service of the Grief Recovery Institute Foundation, Los Angeles, Calif.

National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO)

800/658-8898

www.nhpco.org

The Compassionate Friends

(630) 990-0010

www.compassionatefriends.org

Self-help group for bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings with more than 500 local chapters.

National Directory of Bereavement Support Groups and Services
(718) 657-1277

Listing of local, regional and national resources for a small fee, or on loan from your local library.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
www.lastacts.com

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