

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Supporting a Co-Worker Through Grief or Illness

Illnesses or deaths in the family are some of the most common problems affecting workplace performance. When someone you work with goes through an illness or bereavement, you can expect changes in their behavior.

Sometimes, these problems don't surface right away, but appear months after the loss. This is natural. A “delayed reaction” can be part of the grief process.

The Effect on You

As workers, we form attachments to one another. We build bonds through a shared interest in the work itself, or simply through an appreciation of the experience of working together. Depending on the nature of your attachment to a co-worker, his or her changes will affect you in varying degrees. This depends on:

- How closely you work together
- How well you know one another
- The nature of your professional relationship (i.e., Are you at the same level or is one of you the boss?)

Your Response: Finding a Balance

Your ill or newly bereaved co-worker will have needs. They might be too overwhelmed to know what to do. They may need information on bereavement leave or benefit entitlements. If you have access to this information, feel free to share what you know. If not, offer to connect your co-worker with the person or department that can help them get what they need.

The ill or bereaved person may need support with a variety of issues. These may include:

- Someone to listen to their experiences and feelings

- Support in negotiating time off during the first year of bereavement

- Help to maintain productivity, prioritize and organize daily tasks and/or make arrangements for temporary workload reassignments

- To be connected with local support groups, professional counselling or educational programs for people in their situation

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Supervisors may be able to help those who work with the bereaved person by:

- Providing access to printed and audio-visual materials on the grieving process.
- Offering workshops and in-service training on bereavement issues to sensitize staff and build awareness.

The Importance of Routine

When dealing with loss, work is important. Work is a big part of learning to live again. A significant illness or the death of a loved one can be some of life's most stressful events. Work's routine and productivity help many people get through their grief. Work helps a bereaved person deal with their pain by living life day by day.

Having a job to go to tells the bereaved worker:

- There is a purpose for living today
- Others need and care about me
- I have tasks to complete

What Do You Say?

Above all, be authentic. Phrases like "It's a blessing that he or she is no longer suffering," or, "Time heals all wounds," may come to mind, but as clichés, they can cause more hurt than comfort.

Likewise, you might want to avoid saying, "I know how you feel." Even if you have lost a loved one, you cannot walk in another's shoes. A simple response is more helpful than advice. Just be honest. *"I was very sorry to hear of your loss,"* will probably be more appreciated.

Offering your sympathy, support and help when a co-worker is going through a rough time makes things easier for your work mate to cope. In one of life's loneliest moments, it also lets them know that you care.