

the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

Grief in the Workplace

In the last several months, many people have had to cope with grief in ways they have never experienced before. Thousands have suffered the unexpected loss of a loved one or colleague due to COVID-19, and many others have endured separations from family and friends due to social distancing or an inability to travel. Many personal events, such as weddings and vacations, have fallen by the wayside, too.

The workplace is not immune from the impact of these events. Losing a loved one, whether to COVID-19 or a different illness or injury, still affects employees the same, and some may be coping with the extra strain of being unable to hold services or gather with family.

The loss of support systems, including those that employees derive from work, may weigh heavily on your team as well. And some workplaces have experienced direct losses, such as layoffs, restructuring, or the death of an employee.

Taken together, this adds up to a lot of loss for people to absorb. In addition, the ongoing nature of the pandemic has made it harder to engage in activities that rebuild resilience or allow for healing. With winter on the horizon and the rate of COVID-19 cases rapidly escalating, employees may struggle, especially if they are unable to spend time with family during the holidays.

In these unique circumstances, managers may wonder how to demonstrate compassion while also keeping work on track. If you're trying to find the balance, these tips may help:

- ▶ **Acknowledge losses.** It's important to not just recognize, but acknowledge that your team may be coping with an unusual level of loss. Pretending that nothing has happened or sticking to



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business as usual could lead to a backlash, particularly when recent events have directly impacted the workplace. (See “How Do I Say That?” for guidelines on how to announce the death of an employee or one of their family members.)

► **Watch for reactions.**

Common signs that someone is grieving include:

- Anger, sadness, depression, fear, or guilt
- Emotional outbursts, such as becoming upset over seemingly minor problems
- Extremes in behavior, such as quiet employees becoming withdrawn

- A need to talk with others
- Difficulty concentrating or completing work on schedule

Keep in mind that you may be experiencing these reactions too.

- **Be sensitive.** Many team members are coping with personal and professional disappointments. While this may seem small compared to a death or illness, it is still a loss, and people will need time to absorb these experiences. Remind employees that LifeMatters is available to assist them if they are struggling.
- **Encourage camaraderie.** Friendships are an important

part of the workplace experience. Limited contact with colleagues may make it harder to draw from that sense of camaraderie during times of need. If your team is working remotely, consider scheduling a video lunch where people can relax and spend casual time together. If you're onsite, a cook-out or other socially-distanced event may help make up for lost opportunities to socialize.

- **Provide structure.** The structure of work can be very helpful to someone who is grieving, but there may be times when they have difficulty focusing. Set priorities and provide clear, specific instructions so employees can stay on track with work tasks. Remind employees who are struggling to focus on what they can control.
- **Consult with LifeMatters.** The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can provide resources and assistance to help your team cope with everything from the impact of traumatic events to the challenges of coping with change. Help is available 24/7/365.

While the pandemic will eventually end, its impact on employees' lives may linger for years to come. LifeMatters is available to help with both current and future needs. Please call.

How Do I Say That? Announcing a Death

Announcing the death of a team member or a colleague's loved one is one of the more difficult tasks a manager may face. These steps will help ensure the situation is handled with sensitivity:

1. Consult with Human Resources and your manager.

Once you have been informed of the death, notify Human Resources. If the employee has lost a loved one, confirm available bereavement leave and any other resources the organization may offer. If the employee is the deceased person, verify what resources can be offered to the family and what assistance could be offered to your team as well.

- ## 2. Make the announcement.
- If a team member has died, assemble your work group, either in person or virtually, to deliver the news. Announcements about the death of an employee's loved one could be sent via email, though in some instances, it may seem more appropriate to notify your team in a meeting or one-on-one phone calls.

Sample language: "I have been



informed today that (colleague or colleague's loved one) has passed away."

3. Give your team time to react.

Allow time for the team to absorb the news. Let them know what resources may be available to help them cope with their reactions. Keep in mind that a team may be affected differently by the expected news of someone's death (such as after a long illness) than they would be by a sudden, unexpected death. In addition, some team members may feel the impact of a co-worker losing a loved one more strongly if they have experienced a similar loss.

Sample language: "I know this is difficult news. Please take the time to talk with each other, if needed. I'm available as well."

- ## 4. Provide details about memorial events when they become available.
- Talk to HR about how to cover work schedules so that employees who wish to attend services during work hours are able to do so. This is particularly important if the person who has died is a member of your team.





5. Make a referral to LifeMatters.

Remind your team that LifeMatters is available to help them cope with their reactions to the loss.

Sample language: “LifeMatters is available anytime you need it. If you’re struggling, please call.”

6. Follow up. The death of a co-worker or the unexpected loss of a colleague’s family member may have a strong impact on your team that could linger for a while. Be sensitive to anniversaries and other challenging moments, such as reassigning a deceased

employee’s office or workstation.

Sample language: “I wanted to check in and see how you are doing. I know this has been a challenging time for our team. Is there anything you need?”

Announcing the death of an employee or team family member is not easy, and you may have a strong personal reaction to delivering the news. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help you ensure that the situation is handled with dignity and respect. Emotional support and practical resources are available 24/7/365. Please call.

Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- ▶ Confronting an employee about performance issues
- ▶ An employee’s personal problem
- ▶ Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- ▶ Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- ▶ Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- ▶ Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- ▶ Your own personal concerns
- ▶ Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.

Call the **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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