

Coping with Grief

When loss occurs

Many of us have experienced the death of a co-worker, close friend or family member. Yet, when such a loss occurs, we often feel overwhelmed with grief at many levels. We wonder if what we are thinking or feeling (physically and emotionally) is normal. Frequently, despite our attempts to keep personal and professional lives separate, grief comes to work with us. It affects work relationships, attentiveness, motivation, and overall performance on the job. If you are grieving, here are some things that can help.

One place to start is by recognizing that you are experiencing an inevitable, normal, and natural response to loss, a truly universal human experience. You will experience this loss in your own unique and individual way. Research has identified several stages of grieving. Learning about the stages of the grief process can be helpful, however, there is no one “right” way to experience grief.

Grief often affects us physically

Problems with sleeping, fatigue, changes of appetite, and actual physical illness are common complaints. Because these problems may be confused with very real medical problems, it's important to take good care of your physical self.

Grief often affects the way we think

The experience of loss can become a filter through which we see, hear, and interpret the rest of the world. Behavior changes based on this “filtering” can be expected. We may begin making decisions differently or our expectations and priorities may change dramatically. Sometimes grief reminds us of earlier losses, thinking about them at this time may help heal the past.

Most noticeably, grief affects the way we feel

It's common to feel numb, guilty, deeply sad, angry and hopeful all in a short period of time. Experiencing an “emotional roller-coaster” may become the norm for a short time. Because we are unique individuals and experience grief in different ways, there is no “normal” schedule for grief. We each take whatever time we need for this experience. Believing that we should be “over it” at some arbitrary time limit may be adding an additional burden to ourselves. There is no evidence to suggest a common time frame for grieving.

By accepting a normal and natural view of grief, those who grieve, their coworkers, supervisors, and managers can be more supportive. During this time everyone involved in or impacted by the grieving process may feel additional stress, contacting your EAP for support is recommended.

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Helpful things to do while grieving:

- Take time to be alone with your thoughts and feelings, to seek support from others, and to make decisions.
- Feel your feelings. They will be intense, but you will survive them.
- Know that it's okay to cry. In fact, it can be quite helpful.
- When you feel angry know that it will pass. Try not to act on it in a way that will hurt yourself or others.
- Use meaningful rituals to help honor the past and your loss. Honor your memories.
- Seek the support of friends, family, and social or religious groups.
- Get a medical examination if you haven't had one recently or if you are experiencing insomnia, fatigue, change in appetite or other physical symptoms.
- Practice good nutrition. Eat regular meals, drink plenty of water, and reduce your use of coffee and alcohol.
- A moderate physical exercise program is one way to work out those anxious or angry feelings. A massage can be comforting and a release for feelings.
- Avoid taking on unnecessary or additional stress.
- Let others know what you need from them. It's likely that others don't know how they can help you.
- Experiment with your boundaries. There may be times when you will want to be alone, so you'll need to let others know.
- Focus on whatever has helped you heal past losses: prayer, meditation, contemplation, passage of time, keeping a daily journal, community involvement and activities, and do not forget humor and laughter.

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For friends/co-workers

- Make an effort to attend funeral and memorial services.
- Even if you feel uncomfortable, don't stay away. Your caring message can be expressed in a number of ways, but your presence may be more eloquent than you could ever know.
- Ask questions to help clarify what is really needed, such as: Is it all right for me to visit after work today? I've got something for you, when would it be okay for me to come by?
- Try to anticipate what will be needed and when, rather than asking "What can I do?" Simple favors like raking leaves or picking up dry cleaning can be a helpful and immediate way of showing you care.
- Don't forget about your grieving friend or coworker even when they seem distant or lost in the grief process. Make a special effort to reach out. Be considerate and expect that you might hear "no" for an answer.
- Remember that each person's grief process has similar stages but is ultimately as unique and different as the individual.
- Respect your coworker's privacy by asking what information, if any, they would like shared with others.
- If you are reminded of losses in your own past, you may have some old grief to resolve. Honor your own process.
- Before reporting back to friends and coworkers at work ask what information should be shared.
- Your EAP can provide additional support, direction, and suggestions for dealing with grief. If you are grieving, too, take care of yourself. It is the only way you can take care of others.