Helping Your Grieving Staff Member

Handle the situation in a sensitive but forthright manner.

Set an example for open communication of everyone - establish contact with the grieving employee(s) as soon as possible.

Feeling awkward and not knowing what to say to grieving employees is normal. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge their grief and loss openly.

Acknowledge their loss by sharing your reaction: "I'm so sorry about...." Always respect the confidential nature of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others.

Be patient, compassionate, optimistic and available to listen. Do more listening than talking. Expect an employee will need to talk about the loss many times, especially during holidays and anniversaries which are extra difficult.

Periodic tears and low spirits are typical. Ask about specific things you might do to help: do they want any information shared with others; do they need help with their work? It's a time that demands flexibility.

Make sure you ask what you can share and what is confidential.

Don't expect employees to "snap out of it" or expect their grief will go away quickly. You need to create an accepting environment where grieving is seen as a process that takes time and is normal, yet work can progress.

When a specific individual is not coping well, shows signs of depression or their grieving response is beyond the range of emotions seen in others, seek consultation from FEAP for additional guidance.

In the case of suicide, advise the worker about the usefulness of survivor support groups. FEAP will help connect them with an appropriate group or individual.

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 it will deepen him/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.

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.

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.

The Role of the Manager  
Grief is an important and necessary process for your impacted employee(s), and recovery takes time. Telling an employee to "snap out of it" will not return an employee to a productive life and is not conducive to a comfortable and productive work force.

* Grief work is hard work and is lonely work, and you, as the manager, cannot make it "go away." Your job as a manager is not to "manage the grief" but to create an environment where work can progress as your employees move through the grief process.
* Your caring support and professionalism can set an example that will last long after the experience and is one of the most conducive elements to beginning the healing process for your work force.
* For your employee who has not yet returned to work, stay in touch. The coworkers themselves may also remain in contact, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.
* Taking care of yourself as an individual and getting guidance and support in your managerial role is very important at this time. Managers can play an important role in workplace healing.

When the Employee Returns to Work 

Before your employee comes back to work, ask how you can help. Some questions you might consider with your returning employee include:

* Would you like me or another person to share any information with the others? If so, what information or details would you like them to know? Do you want to talk about your experience when you return, or would you prefer to concentrate on the work?
* Are you aware of any special needs at this time? Privacy? Initial reduced work hours? Help to catch up on your work?
* The answers to the above questions may change on a daily basis in the beginning. Employee emotions are not yet stable. Keep asking the questions and listen to your employee’s response.
* Offer specific help. Many people in grief will find they are too tired, too numb, too overwhelmed to decide what they need. Help offered such as grocery shopping, childcare, bringing meals, can be a huge help to the employee.
* Don’t rely on the worker to bring up the loss.
* Acknowledge the loss. There really is no right or wrong thing to say. The wrong thing is to say nothing at all. Avoid comparisons such as "I know just how you feel because my brother………." What you know is how you felt, and we will not really know what another’s feelings might be. Everyone’s reactions are very unique.
* Expect to hear repetition in the telling of the story. Part of the healing is telling the story....talking. However, if this is not the proper time or place, you can acknowledge that they want to talk and schedule the conversation at a more appropriate time and place ("I can’t talk right now. Can we talk at 3:00PM today?).
* You may also need to set limits. You may find listening is difficult for you at any given time for various reasons. Acknowledge what they are saying is important, but listening is difficult right now.
* A touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone. If you are comfortable doing so, ask permission to hug the person.
* Remember holidays and anniversaries as being especially difficult times for a grieving person. Ask what you can do to provide extra support during these times.

The 10 Best and Worst Things to Say to Someone in Grief

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