

Summer, 2004

When a Colleague Is Grieving

by Jim Platt

It is often difficult for us to talk about death, especially when we lead very private lives, rarely interjecting personal anecdotes during the normal day-to-day work routine. However, the work place can be a very important setting in which to share concern about one's well-being. It is rare that we would experience the loss of a colleague, friend, or family member without feeling an impact on our job performance.

Asking About the Loss

Most hospice organizations recommend that it is important to take the initiative and talk with the bereaved about what has happened. The grieving individual will often keep his or her thoughts and feelings private because they don't know who will be comfortable in talking about the loss. So please, take that risk: ask your co-worker how he or she is doing, and just listen. You do not have to do anything else but listen.

The Mechanics of Listening

Death is permanent—we can't cure it, change it, or zap the grief into disappearing. Listening is just that: You cannot be actively listening if you are simultaneously looking for quick solutions to "fix" the individual who is grieving. A crucial component of grieving and healing is the sharing of one's experience of the person who died as well as the impact of the loss. Advising and listening cannot occur simultaneously.

The Stages of Healing (or Grieving)

1. *Denial*

At this point, we may be awakening from the denial. That which we had hoped or prayed would not take place has indeed occurred.

2. *Anger*

As the denial evaporates, and the reality becomes known, a distinct feeling of anger is often experienced. We feel cheated: "Why did this have to happen to him or her and not someone else?" "Why now? This is the worst possible time for this to happen." "If only he had taken his medicine like he was supposed to!" The anger can be transmitted globally, toward any person, place, or thing serving as a target, or it can implode internally.

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3. *Bargaining*

“If only I had done something differently this wouldn’t have happened.” There may be a sense of guilt. “I thought there would be more time; I never said any of what I wanted them to know...”

4. *Depression*

The gut-wrenching emptiness that signifies the hopelessness and powerlessness of fully understanding that the loss is permanent.

5. *Acceptance*

This is the final stage of grieving and the first stage of really beginning to heal. Please note that there is no exact timetable or diagram to follow that identifies how people move through these stages. Although there may be some similarity, there is much variation in the ways that we each experience this process.

Moving Forward

Folks will sometimes become bogged down in their grief and unable to move forward. Because we may feel helpless in attempting to “fix it” for them, our demeanor can be one of frustration and indirectly transmit a message of “Hurry up and get over it—you’re only hurting yourself,” or “You certainly are making me feel uncomfortable, you have to move on.” We must be patient and accepting. That being said, when someone seems to be stuck in a protracted period of grief, and you are concerned about his/her well-being, then it certainly may be time to suggest meeting with a professional. You may not be able to “cure” the grief, but you may provide the necessary ingredient to help bridge the grief by accompanying the individual to that initial appointment with a health care or religious professional.

Please remember that creating healthy memories is also part of healing. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may cope differently, feeling the loss more or less strongly than you. And last but not least, be aware of your reaction to a deceased coworker’s replacement. Your anger or disappointment at their performance, personality, or work style may be less a function of the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing.

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Resources and Readings

The Faculty/Employee Assistance Program (FEAP) may have suggestions on bereavement support group resources. Several organizations in the community offer bereavement support services. Hospice of the Upper Valley works with individuals and families before and after a death, and is experienced in helping with workplace grief issues. Most hospices' bereavement support services are available to anyone in the community who has suffered a loss. Please give us a call at 646-1165 for more information.

The following related publications are available from the
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization
<www.nhpco.org/>:

A Guide to Grief

Grief in the Workplace: A Guide for Managers

Grief in the Workplace: When a Coworker Suffers a Loss