



When a Grieving Coworker Returns to Work

Given the time coworkers spend together, their relationships are often like extended family. Throughout a tenure of a career, coworkers hear about and share each other's celebrations, such as graduations and marriages, as well as the unfortunate losses. Though it is much simpler to acknowledge the joys a birth, support is also needed in times of a family death, and coworkers want to respond.

When the time comes for an employee to return to work after the death of a loved one, the transition can be difficult for all parties. Being uncomfortable is normal. Coming back to work after a death may offer some relief for the bereaved. They may welcome the routine as a distraction from their grief or as a way to structure their time. They may not want to say much about their loss or may not want to talk about it all. Alternatively, they may have moments when they are overcome with sadness, when they seem to have trouble concentrating, or when they need help.

It's OK to say "I'm sorry," then allow the person to take the lead and continue the conversation or to get back to work topics. Don't push. Allow the bereaved person to direct this interaction.

Coworkers need to respect the efforts of the bereaved to return to a sense of normalcy. It may help to briefly mention the loss with the understanding that the workplace is not the place to explore the feelings deeply. Coworkers can offer to help with simple tasks at work or with meals at home as ways to assist the grieving person as they heal.

Below is a list of some simple Do's and Don'ts that can help guide your interactions with a coworker who has lost a loved one:

- Do listen. Your coworker will need to talk, express pain, fear, guilt, and shock.
- Do be there. Help out with things that need to get done at work or at home.
- Do talk about the person who died by name. Talking about the dead does not cause more pain, it decreases a sense of isolation.
- Do share memories of the person if you knew him or her.
- Do be patient. Everyone heals at his or her own rate.
- Do respect individual differences. Some people find talking about their loss helps them manage their grief and ultimately heal. Others keep to themselves. Always keep in mind the place to discuss sensitive matters needs to be respectful and private.
- Do be aware that all your coworkers will respond differently. Respect the fact that other coworkers may feel the loss more or less strongly than you or cope differently.
- Don't try to take the pain away. You can't.
- Don't say, "I know how you feel," even if you have also lost a family member.
- Don't try to minimize their pain by saying things like, "It was God's will," or "At least you have other siblings or children."
- Don't tell them what to do. They will need to do many things that may not make sense to you during the first year following the loss.
- Don't take changes in your coworker personally. Your coworker may become withdrawn or more irritable for a while.

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Healing from the death of a loved one is a long, slow process, but getting back into a routine is an important step for your coworker. Your first attempt at reaching out to your coworker may not feel right to you. Don't let that deter you from finding another way to show your support. The discomfort of the strong emotions and reactions to death are challenging. Sometimes showing sympathy takes a little practice.

If you need additional information or would like to speak with a counselor, please call the EAP at [877-327-4278](tel:877-327-4278) or visit us at harvardeap.kgreer.com. We are available 24/7 to assist with your concerns.