

Supporting a Coworker After a Loss

Navigating someone else's grief can be challenging, especially in the workplace. Loss is very personal; it can be hard to know if we're helping or hurting the person in pain. Grief is a unique experience for each person, but compassion and support from others can often help them feel less alone. Below are some tips for supporting a coworker after they've experienced a loss.

- **Acknowledge the loss.** It's common to feel unsure about what to say, but avoiding the topic isn't the answer. You can bring it up respectfully: "I was so sorry to hear about what happened," then let the person take the lead. Attending the funeral or memorial service, sending flowers, or making a donation in the name of their loved one can also be meaningful. This can help the person feel that their loved one's memory lives on.
- **Listening is key.** Don't change the subject if your coworker brings up the death. Allowing them to talk about the loss is a way of offering support. Don't be afraid of tears or silence. Let them fill in the words when they're ready.
- **Offer practical support.** Instead of saying, "Let me know what I can do," volunteer to do specific things to help. Consider small ways that you may be able to be useful – bringing meals or offering to do tasks that they may not have the concentration level or energy to complete.
- **Understand that there isn't a "normal" way to grieve.** Don't assume you know how your coworker is feeling or how they will react. They may have many different emotions, often in the same day. Continue to reach out and include them in ways you always have; it's okay if they decline your offers.
- **Recognize that grief can be long-term.** The grief process can last longer than many people realize. While a year might seem like enough time to recover and the outpouring of support fades, grief can still surge. Check in every so often. Special occasions such as birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of the death can be especially hard.

When it's a child

- It's very hard to find words when someone loses a child. You can say that you're sorry about what happened and the pain they're feeling.
- Don't try to find something positive in the death. Statements that begin with "At least..." are generally not helpful. (i.e., "At least you have other children.")
- Don't tell a grief story of your own. This is *their* time to grieve.
- Be careful about offering religious comments. They may not share your beliefs.
- Be sure to treat all caregivers with the same kindness...mothers, fathers, stepparents, extended family, and so on. Anyone can be deeply impacted by the loss of a child.

What to avoid saying:

"God only gives you what you can handle."

"I know exactly how you feel."

"They're in a better place."

"Be strong."

What you might say:

"I am sorry for your loss."

"I can't know how you feel, but I'm here to listen if you need me."

"Whatever you're feeling, whenever you're feeling it is OK."