

A Manager's Quick Guide to Trauma, Grief and Loss

Practical tips for creating a supportive work environment

How can you support grieving or traumatized employees while meeting work responsibilities? What should you do when someone in the workplace dies? Understanding what employees are experiencing and how you can help them cope makes the process easier.

Grief is a normal reaction to loss and typically involves five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The bereaved employee may not move through the stages in a linear path or immediately show signs of grieving. The employee may also experience sorrow, fear, confusion, and frustration – or a host of other emotional responses.

Trauma results from severe emotional stress or physical injury and generally consists of seven stages: shock, denial, impact, mourning, safety, reconnection, and resolution. As a traumatized employee goes through these stages, he or she may experience a vivid re-experiencing of events, grief, guilt, anxiety, fear, and anger.

In the workplace, a grieving or traumatized employee may display the following symptoms:

- Reduced productivity
- Inability to concentrate

- Irritability
- Disorganization
- Decreased ability to handle stress
- Lack of emotion or, conversely, an exaggerated emotional response to things
- Overworking

Your timely, sensitive support can result in reduced absenteeism, a faster return to normal productivity and a stronger sense of loyalty and trust. Remind traumatized employees of the help available through their Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

As a manager, you can create a supportive workplace for an employee who has suffered a loss by:

- Using caution when assigning new tasks to the employee.
- Considering a temporary adjustment to the employee's duties.

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- Asking how you can help the employee.
- Expressing sympathy for the employee's loss.
- Preventing exhaustion by providing adequate staffing and setting clear priorities.
- Sharing public information with other employees, such as memorial service dates.
- Encouraging employees to provide support (such as meals, visits or cards) to the bereaved or traumatized employee.

Dealing with the death of a workplace team member can be especially difficult. Here are a few things you can do as a manager to help employees cope:

- Have employees gather in a conference room or meet with you in small groups to communicate what has occurred or to acknowledge what they may already know. Keep boxes of tissues and water on hand.
- Be tolerant of a wide range of responses, as there are different ways to show grief. Provide employees with the space to absorb the news and the time to be with others who knew the deceased.

- Consider letting those closest to the deceased leave for the day, if needed. Some employees may prefer to stay at work with others who knew the deceased.
- Once people have had time to absorb the loss, and if there is employee interest, it may be helpful to have a counselor come onsite to conduct a grief group.
- When deciding what to do with the deceased's workspace or personal belongings, allow input from your team.
- If there is employee interest, consider having a workplace-led memorial service for the deceased.

Normally, grief and trauma symptoms lessen over time. However, an employee may benefit from professional help if his or her symptoms worsen or last longer than a month.

Need help?

**Call toll-free, 24 hours a day,
seven days a week:**

1-800-242-6220

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