



## Supporting Grieving Employees

### How Supervisors Can Help Ease Employees' Grief

Grief is one of the most universal human experiences and yet, it can be one of the most uncomfortable topics to navigate in the workplace. Many leaders want to do the right thing but aren't sure what that looks like. Some supervisors instinctively offer space, patience, and flexibility—allowing grieving employees to step away when emotions run high or to take the time they need to be with family. These thoughtful gestures can make a lasting impact, helping employees feel supported during one of the most difficult periods in their lives.

However, not everyone knows how to respond in these moments. If you've ever hesitated to approach a grieving colleague or worried about saying the wrong thing, you're not alone.

#### Why It's Hard to Talk About Grief

There are many reasons why conversations about loss feel so difficult. For some, grief can stir up personal emotions or a discomfort with mortality. Others may worry about crossing boundaries, offending someone, or simply not knowing the "right" thing to say. Because of these fears, people often choose silence or avoidance—not out of a lack of compassion, but out of uncertainty.

Unfortunately, doing nothing can unintentionally signal indifference. Imagine experiencing a significant loss, only to return to work and feel like no one acknowledges what you're going through. This absence of support can deepen an employee's sense of isolation and affect trust, morale, and engagement.

#### Why It's Worth Getting It Right

How a grieving employee is treated, especially by their direct supervisor, can shape their entire experience of returning to work. Managers set the emotional tone for their teams. Even small gestures of acknowledgment and empathy can go a long way toward helping someone feel seen and supported. While there's no perfect script for responding to grief, there *are* practical ways to become more confident and compassionate in these moments. The skills to support a grieving employee aren't just "nice to have"—they're essential to creating a caring, resilient workplace culture.

#### Suggestions for Supervisors

##### **Communicate.**

Notifying staff is critical. Managers who learn about a death in a coworker's family should ask permission to notify colleagues and of any information the family wishes to disclose (passing along the importance of resisting the urge to probe for details). You may want to designate a person to disseminate information about memorial services.

Why should you avoid leaving notification to the grapevine? Picture this break room scene: A person asks a colleague who's been off on maternity leave to see baby pictures. However, the newborn died.



### **Acknowledge the loss.**

It's important to personally acknowledge the death has occurred. This can be a simple "I'm sorry," a handwritten note on a desk, or flowers. It shows you care about your colleague as a person. Also, permit coworkers to attend the funeral, organize whatever company support is available, and arrange for flowers or other appropriate acknowledgment. These gestures are never forgotten.

### **Understand grief.**

Supervisors tend to impose unspoken deadlines for healing, but it's important to understand that grief is rarely neat and tidy. Be patient and give your colleague the time needed to get better. Understanding that a colleague will experience the stages of grief—denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance—will help in finding ways to be supportive.

Remember that returning to work doesn't mean the grieving process is over. Everyone grieves in their own way, in their own time. Grief over the loss of a loved one can hit with such staggering force that the ability to work is altered for months or years. In some cases, a grieving worker may find solace in returning to work and appear almost normal for a while, only to fall deeper into grief months later.

### **Be flexible.**

Communicate with team members about what has happened and figure out ways to share the load until the grieving person returns to full strength. One suggestion is to get the team together and explain the need to compensate for a member who's grieving, to be sensitive about work demands, and to understand it will take time for the person to get back to full productivity.

If you can, ease the workload for grieving colleagues so they can go home early, or offer time off when colleagues are too grief stricken to be effective. Failure to allow extra time can detract from employees' long-term productivity. In some cases, going back to work too soon can render an employee incapable of giving the job the attention it requires.

As a supervisor, you may feel torn between showing compassion and protecting the bottom line. As difficult as it may be to disrupt work schedules or put extra burdens on coworkers, the alternative can be worse.

Denying an employee compassion and adequate time to grieve may complicate and slow the healing process. This can be a prescription for rendering an effective worker incapable, in addition to risking the loss of a productive and loyal employee.

Source: Kelly, L. & Schuette, B. (Ed.). (Revised 2019). *Supervisors can help ease employees' grief*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.