

Death of a Co-Worker or their Loved One

The sudden death of a co-worker due to illness or accident can be a shock and deep loss to any of us, both in our personal and professional lives. When a co-worker dies suddenly or becomes terminally ill, our productivity and the dynamics of the workplace can be greatly affected. The death of a co-worker—or witnessing his or her own struggles regarding a loved one's illness or death—often causes us to reflect on our own feelings about the workplace, our own lives, and our own mortality.

People who work together can become like extended family, and when one member of that extended family suffers a loss, friends and co-workers can feel that grief as well. It can be particularly traumatic when the death is unexpected, or the onset of a terminal illness is rapid.

The following are some suggestions that may help you through this difficult time:

The Grieving Process—Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to individually process. How we experience these feelings and symptoms varies from person to person. We do not follow or heal according to a timetable, but over time our emotions *do* ease. Some common emotions or symptoms can include shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorder, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and difficulty concentrating.

It is not unusual to experience more than one of these emotions or symptoms at the same time and in varying degrees. It is important to remember that it is possible to shift between emotions, and certain times, such as anniversary dates or birthdays, may be more intense or difficult. The extent, depth and duration will depend on how close we were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and our own situation and losses that we have experienced.

Some outcomes of the grieving process can include:

- **Finding a new balance:** In time, we learn to cope and adjust to change.
- **Growth:** Becoming ready to move ahead with one's life.

If a co-worker has died:

- Consider attending the funeral or memorial service—This gives you a chance to say goodbye and offer condolences to the family.
- Conduct a workplace-only event—A luncheon or office memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.
- Create a memorial—Memorializing a photo, card or special item the person kept on his or her desk might be a way to pay tribute to their memory. Depending on space and the situation, planting a tree at the work-site in the person's honor is a long-lasting way to preserve their memory.
- Hold or participate in some type of collection—This can be done for a special cause or for the family and children of the deceased, if appropriate.
- Create a book of memories—This can be given to the family as a way to let them know of their loved one's work life. These can become unique memories for the family, and a way for you to privately express feelings and memories. It is also a helpful way of letting the family know their loved one was a valued employee and friend, and is missed.

If a co-worker's loved one has died:

- Take the time to offer your condolences and caring support to your co-worker and their family.
- Allow yourself time to grieve for your co-worker's loss and also for the losses you have faced.
- Let your co-worker know that you are thinking about them.

- Allow your co-worker their quiet moments.
- Consider attending the wake, funeral or memorial service.

What to expect:

- People experience grief differently—You or your co-worker may feel depressed, absent-minded, short-tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.
- Creating healthy memories is 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 feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or tend to cope differently.
- A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality—When someone we know dies, we may feel guilty or angry at that person or at life in general. You might question your own life, or ponder the future. These are normal reactions and emotions.
- Be aware of how you may react to a deceased co-worker's replacement or changes to their work area—Your emotions about the new person's performance, personality, or work style may be less about the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing. Changes to the deceased's work area is typically a matter of policy. It is not about trying to erase the memory of that person.

Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com. Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.