Coping with the Death of a Coworker

People who work together are like extended families, and when a person dies, friends and coworkers grieve. When the death is unexpected, as from violence or an accident, it can be particularly traumatic.

The Grieving Process

- People don’t heal on a timetable, but over time the feelings and symptoms related to grief do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. It is also not a linear process; some days will feel better than others and it can feel like you are doing worse after doing better. This is normal and over time, you will start to see the better days outnumber the bad ones.
- People experience grief differently. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief while others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that everyone will react differently, including appearing to not react at all.

What to Expect

Grief may include some or all of these symptoms. If symptoms persist for more than a few weeks, or if they are particularly severe, please see your doctor and contact the EAP.

**Emotional**

- Feeling depressed or a loss of interest in normal life activities
- Feeling numb or that things don’t matter anymore
- Feeling helpless or hopeless

**Physical**

- Eating or sleeping changes (too much or too little)
- Isolating oneself, pulling away from others
- Energy levels are decreased
- Aches and pains that were not present before

**Behavioral**

- Experiencing confusion, forgetfulness, feeling “on edge”, agitated, fearful or worried
- Impulsivity, including excessive smoking, drinking or other substance use
- Yelling or arguing with others (family, friends, coworkers)
- Experiencing recurring thoughts or memories
- Difficulties getting routine things done in any area of your life (home, work, school, etc.)
- Thoughts of hurting oneself or others (if this occurs, seek emergency services immediately)
Some things to consider doing to support your grief process:

- Resume your normal routines as soon as possible, in a respectful manner. Thinking about the values and work ethic of your work group and the deceased can be of help in identifying how to return to your routine while still honoring your coworker’s memory.
- Create a memorial board. If you don’t have enough photographs or other meaningful items, ask other coworkers or use pictures posted on social media.
- Hold or participate in a fundraiser for a special cause or for the family of your coworker.
- Create a book of memories to give to the family. Many people are not aware of the work life of people they love. These will be unique memories for the family and a way for you to express connections to them.
- Conduct a workplace-only event. A luncheon or office-only memorial is a chance for coworkers to acknowledge their unique relationship.
- Attend the funeral or memorial service. Going individually or as a group (or whatever combination works for you and your coworkers), can show support to the family, but also acknowledges and honors your own grief process.
- If you just feel the need to talk to someone, identify a supportive coworker or a family member for mutual support through the grieving process. If your reactions have continued for a more than a few weeks, or you are having thoughts of harm to yourself or others, call the EAP for expert support and guidance.
- Give yourself time to think about your coworker and honor your relationship with them. You may want to schedule a few minutes into your day to do this.
- Avoid alcohol and drug use, as this can delay the grief process and complicate matters. Excessive eating can also sometimes delay our grief process by distracting us from our normal routine. It may further cause physical concerns down the road, especially if you are already dealing with certain medical challenges.
- Be aware of how you react to a deceased coworker’s replacement. Your anger or disappointment at his/her performance, personality or work style may be less a function of the individual, than your grief about the person they are replacing.

If you feel the need for additional support, reach out to Workplace Solutions, your EAP, for confidential, professional guidance at 877-215-6614. For more information on this topic and other related resources, visit our website at www.wseap.com, click log-in in upper right corner and enter access code dupage.