

When a Coworker Is Grieving: The Death of a Child

The Compassionate Friends

A child has died. There are no words to make that all right. But there are many ways you can help by being supportive. You have taken the first step in caring by reading this.

It is important to know that grief is a normal, healthy response to loss. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological reaction to a mind-numbing and life-changing event. Anger, fear, frustration, sadness, loneliness, guilt, and despair are all part of the grief process.

Understand that grief is neither a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith. Actively grieving people experience pain, confusion, lack of concentration, and isolation. Those surrounding them often express frustration and a sense of helplessness, which may, in time, turn to annoyance if the grieving “takes too long.” Yet, the disorientation of grief lasts far longer than our society recognizes.

How Can I Help at the Time of Death?

- Contact other coworkers to let them know the situation.
- Attend the funeral or call on your coworker to extend personal condolences.
- Offer to help by doing something specific such as driving, making telephone calls, and running errands.
- Do not be afraid of tears. For a grieving person, tears are a healthy release.

“Why do they always turn away when tears come?”

Manager

- Be sensitive to the fact that people grieve differently. Some may find great comfort in their work, while others may view it as an extra, sometimes unbearable, burden.
- Offer to share the person’s workload, if you can. Sometimes the smallest gesture lightens the load.

What Can I Say?

- There are no magic words to take away the pain. “I’m so sorry” will express your feelings honestly, while a hug or a touch will often give much-needed comfort.

“A coworker touched my aching heart when she shared her memories of my child at company picnics.”

Secretary

- Mention the name of the child who has died and listen as your coworker talks.

– Avoid saying, “I know how you feel.” It is very difficult to comprehend the depth of the loss when a child dies.

– “It was God’s will,” “Everything happens for a reason,” and other platitudes minimize the death and are rarely seen as helpful by the bereaved.

– Don’t try to state something positive about the child’s death, such as, “At least you have other children,” “At least he didn’t suffer,” or “You can always have another baby.” These statements are of little consolation to the grieving parent.

What Can I Do at Work?

– Listen. Let your coworker express the anger, pain, disbelief, or guilt that may be there. Bereaved parents often have a need to talk about their child and the circumstances of the death over and over again.

– Avoid judgments of any kind.

– Be there. Do not wait for your coworker to ask for help. There are many tasks that need to be done when a child dies. Offer to accompany your coworker during some of these tasks, perhaps on your lunch hour or before or after work.

“Someone met me at work to buy my son’s car. How I wished one of the guys had been with me as the car pulled away.”

Construction Worker

– Remember your coworker on important days such as holidays or the child’s birthday or death anniversary. Send a card, call, or visit. Let the person know that you remember, too.

– Be patient. Grief lasts not just months, but years and can also resurface unexpectedly!

– Talk with management about ways your company can be supportive. It is to everyone's advantage to help out the grieving employee.

– Be responsive to the changes a bereaved parent experiences. While learning to live without the child, the coworker will adopt new behaviors and roles. Don’t expect him to be unchanged by this experience.

– Refer a grieving parent to The Compassionate Friends. There are bereaved parents in each chapter ready to offer support, friendship, and understanding.

– Break the isolation that often surrounds the bereaved by encouraging others to maintain contact with the grieving parents.

– Continue your contact. Stay in touch by inviting your coworker to lunch or coffee.

