

When an Employee is Grieving: The Death of a Child The Compassionate Friends

When a Child Dies

Most people experience the emotional stress of grief following the death of a family member. Regardless of the cause of the death or the age of the child, parental grief is intense, long-lasting and complex. The death of a child is perhaps the most devastating loss a parent may experience and poses unique challenges for employers who are concerned about helping newly bereaved parents to adjust to the demands of the workplace after returning to their job. These guidelines have been prepared by bereaved parents in an effort to help employers become more aware of their needs and to provide some practical suggestions for support.

The Grief Experience

Grief is a natural, normal reaction to loss of any kind. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological response.

Grief is a complex process, guided by our past experiences, religious beliefs, socio-economic situation, physical health, along with the cause of the loss. Love, anger, fear, frustration, loneliness, and guilt are all part of grief.

It is important to understand that grief is neither a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith. Living through grief is never easy. Those who are actively grieving are caught in a web of pain, confusion and isolation. Those surrounding the survivors often express frustration and a sense of helplessness which may, in time, turn into annoyance if the grieving “takes too long.” Yet, grief, with its many ups and downs, last far longer than our society recognizes.

Research shows that there may be a loss of productivity and a rise in accident rates among employees suffering from emotional stress. An employee whose child has died may experience any of the following:

- * Difficulty in making decisions
- * Inability to concentrate
- * Disinterest in job-related details
- * Frustration and irritability
- * Depression and mood swings
- * Marital and family problems

How Can You Help?

There are things you can do to help ease the impact of grief on your employee's job performance. Taking an interested and caring attitude can make a difference to both you and your employee.

Flexible personnel policies may be necessary to help the employee through the initial period of adjustment. Be careful in assigning new tasks or responsibilities. If the employee is involved in hazardous work, please consider a temporary adjustment in duties.

Be certain to work with the employee to determine work assignments. Communicate. Do not over-task, but do allow the employee to indicate readiness for additional responsibilities

Grief is an individual response and varies according to the person and the circumstances. There is no precise time-table for the grief process. During recovery the employee may have varying levels of productivity. However, our experience indicates that on-the-job support enables bereaved parents to recover and become productive employees sooner than those who do not receive support. While resolved grief will lead to a more productive employee, unresolved grief may lead to continuing symptoms.

Other Ways to Help

- Don't try to find magic words that will take away the pain. A simple "I'm sorry," offers real comfort and support.
- Avoid saying, "I know how you feel." It is very difficult to comprehend the depth of the loss when a child dies and to say you do may seem presumptuous to the parents.
- Avoid using, "It was God's will," and other clichés that attempt to minimize or explain the death. Don't try to find something positive in the child's death such as, "At least you have other children." There are no words that make it all right that their child has died.
- Listen! Allow the bereaved parents to express their feelings. Parents often have a need to talk about their child and the circumstances of the death. It may be helpful to encourage them to talk by using a gentle question such as, "Can you tell me about it?"
- Avoid judgments of any kind. "You should...or you shouldn't..." is not appropriate or helpful. Decisions about displaying or removing photographs, reliving the death, idealizing the child, or expressing anger, depression or guilt may appear extreme but these behavior patterns are normal, particularly during the first years following the child's death.
- Don't stifle your own reactions. Although you are in a position of authority, if you experience deep emotion, share your feelings. It is appropriate and the employee will perceive your reactions as caring.

Employee Assistance

If there is an employee assistance program, make sure that it is available to the bereaved parent. Have pamphlets about self-help groups available through your personnel or employee assistance office.

Make Resources Available

Bereaved parents appreciate the support and concern shown by employers. With information, patience and guidance, the employer can be a supportive influence upon bereaved parents as they begin their lonely and difficult journey to recovery.

Helping the grieving parent will be worth your effort. Company morale may be enhanced as other employees observe the way you handle the situation. In addition, your support can create a special bond that may result in a more loyal, dedicated employee.

