

How Can I Help - Ideas for Managers

As a manager, you have work responsibilities. You see that deadlines are met, that you stay within budget, and that your employees have a safe and productive environment. As a good manager, you care that your workers feel supported and valued, and that they can contribute to your company's success. You know that this balance can be hard to find.

When a co-worker or a person you supervise is grieving, when an employee is seriously ill, and certainly when an employee dies, the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict. The suggestions offered here will help, but seek additional help if you need it. Other resources are discussed later.

Understanding Your Role

- Remember that this grief is important and necessary. "Snapping out of it" will not return the employee to a comfortable and productive life.
- The hard work of grief is also lonely work, and you can't make it go away. What you can do is to help create an environment where this work can progress.
- Set an example. Your caring support and professionalism will set a standard that will last long after this experience.
- If the employee has not returned to work, stay in touch. Co-workers might agree on one person to represent them, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.
- Read this entire handout. Make it available to others.
- Make sure that you take care of yourself, too. You have a lot on your shoulders.

Talking to a Grieving Employee

Before the employee returns to work, ask how you can help. Questions you might ask are:

- *Would you like me – or someone else – to share any information with the others?*
- *What information and details do you want others to know?*
- *Do you want to talk about your experience or would you prefer to concentrate on your work?*
- *What are your needs for time? Privacy? Help with your work?*

Listen carefully. The answers to these questions may change each day as emotions swirl. Keep asking, keep listening.

How Can I Help?

- Offer specific help. Many people are too tired or numb to decide what help they need. Co-workers can make that meal, wash that car, and help with childcare.
- Acknowledge their loss and their grief. Don't wait until the right thing to say comes to you. There is no right thing. The wrong thing is to say nothing.
- Personalize what you say. "I remember how much I loved my brother. I'm so sorry about Ed's death." Shared feelings communicate more than good advice.
- Avoid comparisons. "I know just how you feel, because my brother Jim died recently, too." What you know is how you felt, but we never really know another's feelings. Everyone's relationships and reactions are unique.
- Expect to hear the story told, again and again. Telling the story is a part of healing. You need to speak up if the time isn't right. "Gerry, I'm sorry I can't talk with you right now. Let's continue this over coffee this afternoon."
- Speak up if you're uncomfortable. "Gina, what you're saying is important. I'd like to help you find a better listener for these memories, because listening is difficult for me right now." Set limits.
- A touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone. If you're comfortable doing so, ask permission to hug the co-worker.
- Holidays and anniversaries are especially difficult for the grieving. Ask what you can do to provide extra support at these times.

When a Co-Worker is Seriously Ill

- Keep in contact. Regular phone calls to the home or hospital say "you're still part of the team."
- Make sure you know what you can share and what is confidential. Honor those wishes even if you disagree with them.
- Unless the nature of the illness is confidential, get more information from health departments or private associations. Make it available to co-workers who may have questions.

- Check sick leave and other policies that deal with the employee's practical concerns.
- Make plans to continue calls, note and other gestures of support. These contacts can be reassuring to sick employees and their co-workers alike.

Things to Remember in Dealing with the Death of an Employee

- Give employees an opportunity to talk about what happened, regardless of what kind of death it was.
- Listen.
- Do not judge others' feelings or ways of dealing with grief.
- Bring in outside help through the employee assistance program.
- Be alert to the potential for increased injury or accidents because employees are preoccupied.
- Don't assume that everyone will react the same way.
- Don't expect grieving to stop immediately after the funeral services.
- Be flexible – allow employees to attend funeral services and do anything else necessary to help employees deal with their grief.
- Recognize that you may not always be able to do or say "the right thing."
- Take care of your own emotions, too.