

# Supporting Grieving Employees

## Recommendations for Managers



**One of the most traumatic and difficult things in life is to experience the loss of someone you know, whether it is a family member, a friend or a co-worker. News of a death will generally trigger shock and intense emotional reactions, even if the loss has been anticipated due to illness. For some people, grieving (the period of learning to live with the fact that the deceased is gone forever) can bring about strong and sometimes delayed reactions.**

In the workplace, these reactions are important to recognize so that managers and co-workers can provide the best possible support to grieving employees.

### **What might your employees experience?**

While grieving is a normal process for all of us, the duration and intensity can vary depending on the individual and the circumstances. During this process, the grieving person must come to terms with the fact that the deceased will never come back, and gradually learn to live with the memories that remain.

The loss of a co-worker or a loved one can be a destabilizing experience that will require time for recovery. People grieving generally, but not necessarily, go through different stages

(denial, sadness, anger, disorganization, acceptance, reorganization) during which their daily functioning may be affected to varying degrees.

Identified stages of grief are not necessarily experienced as a sequential process. Employees may move in and out of these different stages at different times. In the very early grieving stage, after hearing the news, people can move in and out of numbness, interspersed with intense waves of grief which diminishes over time. Waves of grief may return with varying degrees of intensity when certain events rekindle the feelings

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of loss (the person's birthday, the first office party without the person, etc.).

It is important for management to understand that it is normal for employees to experience varying reactions during the grieving process. These reactions may include: feelings of sadness or anger; questioning the meaning of life in general or of one's own life; needing more solitude or more social support than usual; and experiencing concentration problems, irritability, or chronic fatigue. Work performance, such as a difficulty maintaining focus and making decisions, may be observed especially in the earlier stages of grieving. Everyone works through a grieving process in their own unique way and at their own pace.

After a certain amount of time, which can last weeks or months or longer if this involves the loss of a loved one, people will gradually feel a greater degree of acceptance and will regain a sense of stability, that is comparable to (although different from) the stability they had before their loss.

## How can you best support employees?

If any of your employees show signs of grief, either directly (by talking about it) or indirectly (by unusual behaviours or attitudes that emerge during the grieving process), here are some strategies that can be helpful:

- Check in with grieving employees regularly, convey care and offer support as needed and when requested.
- Respect that people may be deeply affected by a death, even if they did not have much direct contact with the deceased, as the person may have been significant to them in some way. It is also possible that the death may reactivate another loss and grieving process which may not have been completed.

- Resist the temptation to want employees to "get on with it" quickly. Grieving is normal and you cannot artificially speed up the process. If you show signs of exasperation, this can make the grieving period longer and more difficult for employees.
- If you obtain more information on the circumstances of the death that you have been permitted to share, inform known colleagues. In the case of a suicide, you can contact our Crisis Management Team for a consultation before sharing any information as some information may have a negative effect on your staff.
- Be on the lookout for signs of serious destabilization which could indicate that the person needs additional support (i.e. no improvement or even deterioration of attitudes and behaviours). Offer your support and encourage the person to contact the Client Services Centre at Homewood Health.
- Refrain from using clichés like "I know how you are feeling", "It was fate", or "At least now s/he is at peace". You will never know exactly how someone feels and minimizing death is never helpful. Although such comments are well intentioned and intended to diminish the feelings of loss, they often have the opposite effect.
- For employees occupying a safety-sensitive position, check with them regularly to make sure that they are in position to carry out their duties in a safe manner.

Feel free to contact Homewood Health if you would like to obtain advice on how to support grieving employees or impacted colleagues.

Homewood Health is also ready to support you with your own personal reactions and needs as we are here for you, too.

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**Need more assistance or support?** For more information, to book a counselling session or to access Homewood Health for any additional assistance or support, contact our Client Services Centre available to you 24/7 in English and French. All calls are completely confidential.

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