



Death of a Co-worker

Death is an uncomfortable situation for most of us. When a co-worker dies, the situation feels undefined and confusing. We spend a tremendous amount of time together with our co-workers. We are part of the same daily world, yet we may not be close friends. We feel the loss daily as thoughts return to past or present projects, and files or memos resurface. We may feel uncomfortable walking past the “empty desk.”

It is confusing and sometimes frightening for co-workers to experience the depth of these feelings. People often try to talk themselves and others out of them. It is realistic and appropriate that co-workers are affected. To different degrees, we, too, are the mourners, the ones left. It may take some time before we feel like ourselves and things return to normal.

Why I React the Way I Do and You React Differently

There are many factors that affect the way we respond to crises in general and death in particular.

Past experiences have a major influence on the way we react and perceive the situation. These circumstances may include the context and quality of the relationship with the person, our earlier experiences with death, and how we have struggled with other recent losses.

Our way of looking at the world includes our religious beliefs and customs. It may also mean the strength with which we hold on to the “rules of living” which dictate who, when and how the world “should” go. The more we believe that this death “should not have occurred,” the more difficult it is to accept.

Our physical status, including our health, has a significant impact on the amount of energy—both physically and psychologically—we can invest in dealing with the loss.

Lastly, the availability of social support has a big influence on our responses. Are there people with whom we can talk and share our reactions? Are others pretending that none of this is significant? Are there others who understand the special meaning of this death for us?

Given these factors, there are multitudes of responses that we can have. While we usually believe that our reactions are justified, it is equally important to accept that others may react differently. We may mourn publicly, others privately. We may be able to see the person’s name calmly, while the sight of it causes someone else to get very upset. We may feel uncomfortable mentioning what the deceased had said, while another is upset by that reminder. We may want to keep the person’s memory in the present, but another may need to act as if nothing has happened. No one really has the one and only way to respond.

Phases of Coping

People who are adjusting to the loss of another will go through some predictable stages. There is no right or wrong way to go through the process. People tend to skip back and forth between stages in a random fashion. Some get stuck at one phase while others may vacillate between two reactions. Sometimes it is frustrating and disappointing when you try to talk with someone who is in a different phase.

Common phases of coping can be:

Shock and Denial—“No, it can’t be true!”

Often people need to use this phase to cushion the pain of the loss. It is characterized by a numbness, disbelief and feelings of surrealism. Except for a rare few, people do not need to be confronted and will come out of the denial phase by themselves.

Anger—“Why me?” “Why her?”

This anger may be directed at the person who died, an event or other people. It is important to let the grievors experience their anger without being critical or judging whether the anger is appropriate.

Bargaining—“Yes, it is true, but...”

This is the beginning of acceptance. The need here is to let the mourners make the agreements that they need with a higher power, with the person who died and with others. On their own, people will decide—when they are ready—if these promises can be fulfilled.

Depression—“Yes, it has happened to me (us).”

The mourning process is being worked through. The mourners begin to separate emotionally and may accept offerings of support. Usually, the grievors reject offers of reassurances.

Acceptance—“Yes, I am ready to face the world again.”

This is an acceptance of the realities and the need to pick up the pieces and move on.

Why Am I So Affected By This?

Critical incidents—accidents, sudden deaths, injuries—often trigger feelings of vulnerability and upset that were dormant. Though the reason for the sensitivity may have nothing to do with the present event, it may initiate a chain reaction. Talking and thinking about current losses may trigger feelings of sadness about divorces, moves, lost friendships and illnesses, to name a few. This happens because there was not ample opportunity to deal with these feelings when the event occurred. We often discount the importance of these reactions because “that has nothing to do with this—I am over that!”

These reactions are a valuable sign for us to complete our unresolved feelings. Talking and sharing feelings with good friends or family can help. It may also be valuable to talk with an EAP counselor who can assist you in defining the issues and can provide guidance in moving forward. Regardless of how you approach this, do not ignore it. Reburying it only means it will resurface again later.

Signs That You May Be Overly Stressed

Adults often show at least several of the following symptoms when an occurrence has been overly stressful:

- Headaches
- Backaches
- Outbursts
- Fatigue
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sleep disruption
- Lack of concentration
- Making mistakes more than usual
- Disinterest in usual pleasures
- Increased use of alcohol/medications

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