

Dealing with the Loss of a Colleague

You have just heard the difficult news that one of your colleagues has passed away. Perhaps this death was the result of a long-term illness or possibly it came as a total surprise. As a colleague, you may find yourself initially numbed, possibly shocked by the news and you may experience strong and varied emotions. These initial reactions can be influenced by your connection, closeness with this colleague, as well as your personal history of loss. You may be especially impacted if this news triggers any reactions related to recent losses you have experienced or if you have serious health related concerns about a family member or close friend.

What can you expect?

Disbelief is typically the first reaction experienced after learning that someone known to us has died. Periods of sadness and numbness may also be present as we absorb and cope with the news. These reactions are most often more intense when the death was not anticipated or resulted from a suicide.

It may take several hours or days to be able to assimilate the news. Even if the death was somewhat expected, accepting this kind of news will often be difficult for most people.

As the reality of the loss sinks in, it is possible that you may begin to experience intense emotions such as: sadness, guilt, irritability, and sometimes anger in trying to make sense of this loss. These emotions can vary and shift from one moment to the next. Experiencing emotional swings are part of the grieving process and are often described by people as feeling like they are on an emotional roller coaster.

You may also experience fluctuating periods of detachment, numbness, a lack of motivation, and difficulties focusing on work tasks. Some people describe feeling as if they are functioning “on auto pilot”.

Grief is often referred to as a “cyclical process”. You may find yourself experiencing various and, at times, competing emotions. You may feel like you are progressing through the grieving process, moving towards a degree of acceptance, and then find yourself sliding back into more intense emotions.

Such an emotional ebb and flow is the norm rather than the exception.

Everyone’s reaction to loss and how we experience grief is unique to each individual. Colleagues will react and experience grief differently. Your reactions will most often depend on a number of personal factors affecting you at this time. In the case of a colleague’s suicide, you may also experience feelings such as guilt, in addition to various other emotions. This is common as we can feel as if we “could have or should have” been more perceptive and attentive to our colleague’s signs of despair, if in fact it was noticeable.

You may experience some of the following reactions: change in appetite, sleep disturbances, loss of focus, difficulties with concentration, decision making, and disruption of work tasks. It is not uncommon to feel disconnected and generally sad for a period of time.

Experiencing some of the emotions and reactions described above are normal. Talking about them with people you have a connection with, including colleagues you are close with, will assist you with your coping and adjustment to this event.

It is important to respect your own pace and not to lose sight that there is no one specific way of grieving. There is no specific or “recommended” time to work through a loss. Gradually with elapsed time, you will be able to think of your colleague without feeling the intense emotions associated with their death.

Need more assistance or support?

780.428.7587 | TTY: 1.888.384.1152 | International (Call Collect): 604.689.1717

Numéro sans frais – en français : 1.866.398.9505

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What can you do?

- First, **do not try to neglect your emotional reactions** or minimize, dismiss the reactions of those around you. It is normal to need time to accept the loss and the time required for dealing with a loss is unique for every person.
- **Be attentive and supportive** to others experiencing this loss, even if you experience the loss differently from your colleagues.
- **Give yourself permission to confide and share** your feelings with those people you feel comfortable with; this may be colleagues and/or friends and family.
- **Stay as active as you can** – structured activities and some form of exercise have shown to be very helpful in alleviating various levels of distress. Even 10 to 20 minutes of walking a day can support our recovery. Walking with a co-worker can also lend itself to your mutual well-being.
- **Resume your favourite activities**, particularly those that energize you, and possibly embrace new activities that may support your wellbeing. Engaging in positive and rewarding behaviours is more within our control than willfully attempting to change our thoughts or emotions.
- As much as you can, **reflect on how this event has impacted you** and share these thoughts with the people closest to you.
- Even though you will be naturally affected in some way after receiving such unsettling news, we all need to resume our work responsibilities; regaining full capacity and total focus may take a few days for you and some colleagues.
- If after a few days, you are finding it difficult to carry out your job responsibilities, address this with your manager and possibly a trusted colleague.
- If you hold a safety sensitive position (a job that if compromised, could pose a public and workplace safety risk), discuss this immediately with your manager.
- **Remind yourself** about your capacity to draw on your natural resilience to cope and adjust to difficult life events.
- **Give yourself permission** to move forward and gradually regain your normal sense of self.
- If after a few weeks, you find yourself struggling with the impact of the loss of your colleague, **consider seeking support** from the Employee Family Assistance Program at Homewood Health to access support from a professional counsellor.

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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