

Tips For Managing Grief at Work

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Grief is a deeply personal experience and one that every human experiences. The process of grieving will be different for every person and affects how we work and interact with others, as well as how we present ourselves to the world.

When the grieving process shows up in the workplace, there are several ways colleagues and leaders can lend support to a coworker. Leaders should aim to acknowledge a grieving event, ensuring their team members do not feel isolated while retaining their right to privacy. Organizations should have strategies in place to provide resources to members of the team when they need them most.

GRIEVING IS A PROCESS

One of the first things to remember is that grief is not an event—it's a process. The grieving process includes [five steps](#): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Colette Thomas-Lamothe, a certified grief and loss counselor with Nivati, explains that "grieving is what occurs after a loss" and does not have a definitive end.

Some of the more common causes of grief are when a family member passes on or a close friend passed, as well as when the loved ones of an employee are suffering from grief. Other experiences of loss can include the end of a relationship or a pet's passing, as well as tragedies affecting others. We are exposed daily to news from around the globe, which is often filled with reports of natural disasters, violence, and other tragedies. Seeing these events unfold in real-time can be a source of shared grief.

Successful organizations that have built a culture and awareness around mental health respond to tragedy by creating spaces to share thoughts and emotions in both digital and physical forms. Acknowledgment is key—and this can be accomplished, depending on the situation, in one-on-one discussions, all-hands meetings or announcements from leadership, utilizing Slack channels, or informal group discussions. "These are all appropriate ways to acknowledge and support the grieving process in the face of horrible news," says Thomas-Lamothe.

COPING WITH GRIEF AT WORK

It can be tricky to pinpoint where we are in the five steps of grieving (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) and when we are ready to return to work—as well as how productive and focused we might be. For some, work may be a welcome distraction, ideally with a less-than-normal workload. For others, especially those who may have been responsible for making funerals or other arrangements, the grieving process may not even begin until after returning to work.

One tip for taking a slow approach when returning to work is to block off calendar time for ourselves. There are no hard and fast rules here: perhaps it is adding 15 minutes before and after a meeting to reset, then recover. Others have found it helpful to go for a walk, sit outside, or just change their scenery a few times a day to clear their heads. Working half days for a week or two is another way to ease back in at a gradual pace.



move tasks and delegate workload in our absence. The same is true for when we are ready to return and reassign some tasks our way.

These conversations can be uncomfortable to begin and knowing where to start. Jotting down a few quick notes in advance that you want to make sure are expressed, whether your requests are around workload, privacy, or time away, can be helpful. If a face-to-face meeting could surface additional nerves and heightened emotions, using Zoom or a phone call is acceptable. The same goes for sending an email, which can be written over time and ensures a more complete way to share thoughts. If more comfort lies in reaching out to HR, or a leader several levels up in the org chart, those leaders are an option as well.

Another discussion point to relay is privacy and sharing. Having personal details shared around the workplace can be uncomfortable, and making that known to a supervisor as well as HR, can keep sensitive topics private. Conversely, having a leader share news with the rest of the team can avoid having to relive the details more than once. Furthermore, some of us may not want well-intentioned flowers, gift baskets, or cards showing up at our door or desk, and communicating those wishes with management avoids uncomfortable situations as well as provides context for support to colleagues.

Conversations with management can also include tactical items such as equipment to work remotely, or policies around bereavement leave. Requesting additional flexibility, such as in the event of traveling a long distance to services, the inclusion of who may or may not be considered immediate family, can be requested as well.

HOW MANAGERS, SUPERVISORS, AND COWORKERS CAN HELP

Leaders in an organization have an obligation to the individuals they manage. Those in a supervisory role who work day-to-day with a team should take note of any change in behavior, productivity, and demeanor with their direct reports.

Thomas-Lamothe suggests the moment a supervisor sees or feels something off they should “speak to employees in a compassionate and gentle way, then listen.” Coworkers have a role to play here as well, and should also inquire how their colleagues are feeling. It is as simple as asking, “How are you today?” or “What’s going on with you today?” Sending the message that “you’re not alone,” and empathizing with how others are feeling—even if we do not specifically know how they are feeling, other than that they are grieving—is another way to lend support. The goal is to provide a safe space to share. “We all want to be heard and not judged,” Thomas-Lamothe explains.

Allowing employees to grieve appropriately before their grief leads to something else requires a keen and compassionate eye. The key is to pay attention to what is being said and what is not said. Examples supervisors will want to pay close attention to are changes in punctuality, losing the ability to carry out assignments with ease, a change in attitude or appearance, acting more closed off, and being less interactive—or becoming combative—all of which are signals of grief.

Managers are encouraged to “err” on the side of caution. If they notice an employee cannot carry out daily activities, first and foremost, they’ll want to make sure the employee is okay, then give them a place to share thoughts. “If you see causes for concern, managers need to provide support immediately,” says Thomas-Lamothe. “Emphasize to your employees they are not alone, then provide resources and help.”

For more advice on how to talk about wellbeing and mental health with employees, check out the [Manager Training Handbook](#).

Resources vary from organization to organization but can include mental health coverage as part of a company-sponsored health insurance plan, dedicated [mental health programs](#), as well as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that is designed to help employees who are struggling due to substance abuse and mental health issues.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AROUND GRIEF

Leadership should take the opportunity to reinforce, before any grief-causing event, that there are already strategies in place for support, and then regularly educate their teams on what resources are available.



“Over time support can feel like it lessens, and people grieve at different times,” says Thomas-Lamothe. “These very unofficial and organic check-ins and groups designed to share thoughts and feelings can be very beneficial in helping others move forward.”

The message that should resonate with every employee is that it is okay to grieve a loss, and it is okay to seek support. This tells the employee that what they are experiencing is real and they can seek help without judgment.

Compassionate companies realize that their employees spend a lot of the day and week together. Creating a culture around mental health—including grief—should allow the space and environment for love and compassion, community, and unity.

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Download the Mental Health Tool Kit to learn about mental health in the workplace – what it is, why it matters, and how you can start supporting employee mental health!

[Download The Mental Health Toolkit](#)

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