

Responding to Loss: Tips for Helping a Coworker Through Grief

After the death of a loved one, one of the first things a grieving person faces is the need — whether it's emotional, financial, or both — to return to work. Whether you're that person's colleague or manager, a few simple concepts can help you give them the best chance to process their grief and resume a productive work life:

No tiptoeing allowed. When a colleague is experiencing grief, many of us want to acknowledge their loss and express our support, but dread making a gesture that appears empty or inadequate. As a result, we often end up avoiding that person altogether, only deepening their sense of isolation. Remember, you can't cure their grief—what you *can* do is let them know you're thinking of them. A simple handwritten note may free you to resume more comfortable interactions (including social invitations).

Team up. A team meeting held before the person's return to work can help you discuss sharing the load while the grieving employee gets back up to speed. Most coworkers will be eager to show their support, even for colleagues they've never been close to. A warm, strong response to one worker's grief can strengthen everyone's sense of team unity—an unexpected benefit of the grieving process.

Respect the healing power of work. For many grieving people, the routine challenges of work can be reassuring. While it may take them awhile to recover the creative spark to initiate a new project or the drive to exceed expectations, they often take comfort in familiar daily tasks.

Err on the side of patience. Most grieving employees feel pressure, whether it's self-imposed or an unspoken expectation of others, to "get back on the horse." In response, many return to work too soon, or don't take as much time off as they need, ultimately prolonging the grieving process and sometimes leading to a change of employment. If you have a say in the matter, the best course is usually to offer the person as much time off as they feel they need. Few will request an unreasonably long leave.

These principles don't apply only to those who are dealing with the death of a loved one. They can be just as relevant to those who've lost anything important to them. Whether an employee has lost a longtime relationship or a cherished pet, remember that there's no timetable for the grieving process. The best you can do is give it the proper time and conditions to run its course.