

Grief & Loss

in the Workplace for Managers & Supervisors

Grief and loss occurs both at work and home. Serious illness and death in the family are very common problems affecting workplace performance. Typically, grief results from a personal crisis (divorce, fire, work-related or auto accident), sudden death (heart attack, stroke, suicide, homicide), chronic or terminal health problems, or job termination (layoff, discharge).

SHOCK | DENIAL | BARGAINING & SELF BLAMING | ANGER & ANXIETY | ACCEPTANCE

Grief & Loss - Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors

General Information

Managers or supervisors must assure that work responsibilities are being met and that employees feel supported and valued. Where these two needs conflict, these guidelines will help assist employees impacted by personal and/or job loss, accident, or serious or lengthy illness.

Helping Your Grieving Staff Member

- Handle the situation in a sensitive but forthright manner.
- Set an example for open communication of everyone - establish contact with the grieving employee(s) as soon as possible.
- Feeling awkward and not knowing what to say to grieving employees is normal. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge their grief and loss openly.
- Acknowledge their loss by sharing your reaction: "I'm so sorry about..." Always respect the confidential nature of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others.
- Be patient, compassionate, optimistic and available to listen. Do more listening than talking. Expect an employee will need to talk about the loss many times, especially during holidays and anniversaries which are extra difficult.
- Periodic tears and low spirits are typical. Ask about specific things you might do to help: do they want any information shared with others, do they need help with their work? It's a time that demands flexibility.
- Make sure you ask what you can share and what is confidential.
- Don't expect employees to "snap out of it" or expect their grief will go away quickly. You need to create an accepting environment where grieving is seen as a process that takes time and is normal, yet work can progress.
- When a specific individual is not coping well, shows signs of depression or their grieving response is beyond the range of emotions seen in others, seek consultation from FASAP for additional guidance. In the case of suicide, advise the worker about the usefulness of survivor support groups. FASAP will help connect them with an appropriate group or individual.

In the Case of Serious Illness

- The affected employee may have brief periods of absenteeism or hospitalization to stabilize their condition.
- Get to know their health status, capabilities and medical restrictions, don't allow individuals to exceed their limits out of sympathy or indifference.
- Don't pry, but encourage the affected worker to talk about his or her illness and other pressures.
- Everyone benefits from having an employee maintain self-esteem, identity, and integrity to work as long as possible.
- Discuss realistically plans for return to work. Contact Employee Rehabilitation Services or FASAP if assistance with back-to-work plans is needed.

Helping Other Staff

- Ensure your staff know the facts if the loss is made public: what happened, any funerals or memorials that are planned, resources to help cope during the stressful times. This is a good time to address any rumors regarding the event.
- In acute situations (homicides, suicides, overdoses) the event produces even more employee shock, disbelief, and questions such as "what" and "why" it happened. These need to be discussed openly to clarify facts, dispel rumors, and allow grieving to begin. A counselor from FASAP can be used to facilitate group meetings.
- Encourage staff to provide mutual support and sharing with each other. Encourage employees to participate in expressions of their grief to families and loved ones (flowers, cards, meals, anything practical to help the family). One employee may volunteer to be the primary worksite contact with the family.
- If the grief impacts many staff members and disrupts normal operations, plan for coverage or back-up services. The Staff HR Office can consult with you on planning for maintenance of your unit operations or services.
- Acknowledge the strain on co-workers who shoulder additional workloads while coping with their own feelings. Let them know that you are concerned for them, too.

If a Staff Member Dies

- Call a meeting of other staff. Clarify the facts. Give permission to grieve and talk about feelings. Unanticipated deaths, particularly suicides, may require additional times to talk.
- Bring in assistance for meeting and talking with workers if feelings are intense or prolonged. In the case of suicides, debriefing may be particularly important. Counselors from FASAP are available at short notice.
- Be sure that employees know of funeral arrangements and have time to attend.
- Appropriately acknowledge the worker who died - a charitable donation, bulletin board, a tribute in the employee newsletter.

If the Losses & Accompanying Feelings Are Associated With Downsizing or Reorganization

- Allow for reflection on and valuing of the past. An actual history or chronology of the unit's staff and accomplishments is a useful tool for this purpose.
- Point out what aspects of work will remain unchanged. Will there be some "business as usual?"
- Direct efforts to regrouping and directing energy to the new realities. Help forge new relationships and a renewed definition of tasks and commitment. Stress that there may also be gains, such as new opportunity, responsibility and career growth.

Grief & Loss - University Resources

Faculty and Staff Assistance Program

2076 Administrative Services Building | 1009 Greene St. | Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1432
734-936-8660 | www.umich.edu/~fasap | fasap@umich.edu

- Individual, group, and worksite crisis intervention
- Individual and family counseling
- Assessment and regional referral information for support services
- No cost to University staff, family members and operation units

Counseling & Psychological Services

3100 Michigan Union | Ann Arbor, MI 48109
734-764-8312

- No cost to enrolled students and partners
- Individual counseling
- Grief and loss support groups
- Outreach to University departments and housing units

Benefits Office

Wolverine Tower - Low Rise G405 | Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1278
734-615-2000 or toll free 1-800-649-3777 | www.umich.edu/~benefits

- Counseling on benefits for survivors (life insurance, health, dental, and retirement) and/or beneficiary of University faculty, staff members and retirees
- Appointments are available to discuss dependent's continuation of medical, life and pension benefits

Related University Policies

In the case of death in the immediate family, the University provides up to three days paid time off work to attend the funeral or interment and make necessary arrangements (SPG 201.3).

**FOR A CURRENT LIST OF AVAILABLE COMMUNITY RESOURCES
CONTACT FASAP AT 734-936-8660 OR FASAP@UMICH.EDU**

Specialty Grief Support Groups and Services

Contact FASAP for the latest referral contact person for each group

- Bereaved children, adolescent or young adults support
- Caregiver's support
- Compassionate Friends (parents whose children have died)
- Hospice information
- Major illness and physical loss support
- Widows and widowers support
- Support for separated and divorced men and women