

Grief and Loss in the Workplace During COVID-19

All New Yorkers are likely hearing about or directly experiencing the death of someone they know, including coworkers and loved ones, during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak. As people who work side by side sharing work and personal experiences, coworkers can become a significant part of your life and these losses can impact you and everyone in the workplace. Recovery takes time and can be even more difficult with the realities of physical distancing policies. You may not be able to experience and cope with grief in ways you would otherwise, such as physically spending time with colleagues, friends and family; visiting a place of worship; or attending a funeral in person. These changes can be traumatic and may impact grieving. You can support colleagues who have lost loved ones and cope with the loss of a coworker by gaining an understanding of grief, loss, and how to interact with coworkers after a death.

What to Say to a Grieving Coworker

It can be difficult to know what to say to a coworker when learning about the death of their loved one, but not saying anything can make them feel isolated in their grief. Here are a few ways to show your colleague you care:

Show empathy

Simply stating that you are aware of their loss, how difficult this may be for them, and that you are there to support and help as needed, is often the most we can or need to do. You might also send a brief email or direct message such as:

- “Even as we maintain physical distancing, I’m here for you.”
- “If there is anything I can do to make your life easier, please let me know.”

Acknowledge that grief is a process

Grieving is a process. As one comes to terms with their loss, they can experience days when coping and grieving seem more challenging than others. Try to check in with them regularly. When you ask them “How are you today?” invite them to talk more freely, beyond just responding, “I’m fine.”

Offer your support

Offer your help and assistance in a way that will not add to any difficulties they might be experiencing by making them feel pressured to accept. You can say, “I will be here for the next four hours anyway, so if you feel like talking to someone, just call. I am available.” Or you can say, “Making funeral arrangements at a time like this can be extra hard. If you need help figuring things out, let me know.”

Take your cues from the griever

Depending on how close you are with them, they may or may not want to discuss their loss. Even if you are close, they may not be ready to share their grief. Just listen and be ready, if and when they want to talk, but never pressure them to share. You can say, “I’d love to hear more about your loved one whenever you are ready, but I also respect your privacy.”

What not to say

As part of healthy grieving, the grieving person needs to face the magnitude of their loss, so phrases aiming to minimize their loss, no matter how well-intended, will not help. Phrases to avoid when talking with a colleague who has just lost a loved one:

- “You’re going to be fine.”
- “You’re still young, so you can still have a great life.”
- “They are in a better place.”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “Time heals everything.”

Coping with a Death of a Coworker

Depending on the nature of your relationship, you may or may not go through a grieving process following a coworker’s death. Grief is a natural and normal response to losing someone important to you. It is how we process and heal from an important loss. It can be a painful experience. Understanding the grieving experience and how best to cope with it can help you recover from grief of any kind.

As you grieve you can experience a variety of symptoms and reactions, which may include:

- Feeling empty, numb, angry or guilty
- Wondering if there is something that could or should have been done differently
- Trembling, nausea, exhaustion and weakness
- Experiencing nightmares
- Being distracted and behaving absentmindedly
- Struggling to return to usual activities

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone experiences grief differently and each loss is unique.

Coping as a Team

Acknowledge the loss

Create the space and time for coworkers to talk about what has happened, rather than go on as if nothing has happened. It may be helpful to set aside time at virtual staff meetings to check in on how everyone is doing. Send an email to your team about the loss, the impact of this, and include resources for them like the ones listed in the section “[Where to Get Help](#)” below.

Acknowledge individual reactions

When a coworker dies, it can affect each person in the workplace in different ways. Some may be deeply affected by the loss, while others may not. Some people might want to talk about their feelings, while others might want to deal with them in private. Some may take much longer than others to adjust to the loss. Be aware of the different ways that people react to the loss and respect those differences.

Be kind to each other

This is not an easy time for the work unit and many adjustments may have to be made. People may not be at their best. Be patient, gentle and understanding with one another during this time. Find ways to cooperate and share any additional workload. Consciously perform acts of kindness toward your friends and colleagues and try to connect with them about topics other than COVID-19.

Practice self-care

Grief can be emotionally and physically exhausting. You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you, such as rest, relaxation, exercise and diversions. Express your thoughts and feelings to trusted people, because that can be the most helpful. For some people, it helps to write things down. Remind and encourage colleagues to prioritize their self-care needs.

Give yourself and others time

In U.S. culture, there is a tendency to deny the effects of loss and expect ourselves and others to quickly "get over" a loss. Allow yourself and others the time they need to process the loss, and be aware that there is not a predicted amount of time this can take.

Funeral and memorial events

Provide information for everyone on arrangements that have been made and, when feasible, provide time to attend virtually for those who are interested, if available. However, check-in with the family before broadcasting this information – be mindful that each family is different and may choose not to publicize funeral or memorial event information.

Honor the lost coworker

Consider honoring the lost coworker in an appropriate way, such as collecting money for a charity, creating an online commemoration, or sending a letter to the deceased's loved ones.

Coping as an Individual

We may grieve as a team for our lost coworker, but we will each have to process their loss on a personal and individual level as well. This can be traumatic, especially if we knew them for many years and became close friends. Here are a few tips we can use to help us grieve:

- **Accept your feelings.** Recover at your own pace and in your own way. Be patient with yourself.
- **Talk about your loss.** You may find this comforting and feel less alone. Connect with friends and family through phone, text and other digital platforms.
- **Take stock of what is going well.** Write down your strengths and bright moments from the day or share with others.
- **Limit your exposure to media coverage** related to COVID-19. Turn off the TV, shut down the computer, skip COVID-19 related social media posts, and put down the papers.
- **Take a break.** Do something relaxing, energizing or an activity that will lift your spirits.
- **Be part of the community.** Community can offer you a network of support. Stay connected through digital platforms.
- **Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed.**

When to Seek Help

Feelings of grief are natural reactions to important losses. If these feelings persist, your mood does not improve or worsens, or you feel unable to function and perform basic daily activities, reach out for help.

Where to Get Help

For additional information on stress and anxiety, including tips for coping and staying connected and information on grief and loss, visit the “Coping and Emotional Well-being” section at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

If symptoms of stress become overwhelming for you, you can connect with trained counselors at NYC Well, a free and confidential mental health support service that can help New Yorkers cope. NYC Well staff are available 24/7 and can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For support, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat online by visiting nyc.gov/nycwell.

NYC Well also offers a number of wellbeing and emotional support applications (apps) that can help you cope. Visit the “App Library” at nyc.gov/nycwell for online tools to help you manage your health and emotional wellbeing.

The New York State COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline at 844-863-9314 is available 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week. The phone line is staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and refer if needed.

For general information on COVID-19, including how to guard against stigma, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus or cdc.gov/covid19. For real-time updates, text “COVID” to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.