



Death of a Colleague

Grief, What to Expect, and Coping Strategies

We work side by side with our colleagues, commonly sharing the news of our daily lives. As a result, we often consider them not just co-workers, but also friends or members of our extended family. Upon learning of a colleague's death we naturally experience sadness and feelings of loss. The death can also affect our feelings about our work, the workplace, and our own health and well-being. Our feelings can be especially trying when our colleague dies unexpectedly as there may not have been opportunities to say good-bye or share more openly the value of our relationship.

Everyone grieves and processes death differently. Some people may feel that they don't have permission to grieve for a colleague in the way that they would grieve a friend or family member. Some people may feel devastated; others may feel numb and disconnected. Some may withdraw socially while others reach out for support. Guidance through the complex and difficult grieving process is often helpful. What follows are some thoughts about what to expect and how to cope with the death of a colleague.

The grieving process

Feelings and symptoms of grief may take weeks and sometimes months to individually process. We do not heal according to a timetable but, over time, our emotions do ease.

The feelings and symptoms can be different for each of us. They may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disturbance, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and problems with concentration. Most of the time we feel several of these emotions at the same time, but we feel them in varying degrees. The extent, depth and duration will depend on how close we were to the individual who died, the circumstances of the death, and our own situation and losses that we have experienced. Also affecting our grief response will be the number of years worked together, the nature of our relationship with the co-worker, the age of the deceased, the suddenness of the death, and other challenges that may be facing the work group and the staff and/or faculty at the time of the loss. Losing a colleague/friend who helped us do our job, an office mate who stood with us in difficult times of organizational change, and a partner who we may have grown close to over the course of many decades is a painful and tiring experience.

"Grief is a journey, often perilous and without clear direction. The experience of grieving cannot be ordered or categorized, hurried or controlled, pushed aside or ignored indefinitely. It is inevitable as breathing, as change, as love. It may be postponed, but it will not be denied."

~Mollie Fumia

What to expect

- People experience grief differently. You or your co-worker who was particularly close to the person who died may feel depressed, absent-minded, short-tempered, or exhausted. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief while others keep to themselves. Respect and accept that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, and they may cope differently.
- A death may generate questions and fears about our own mortality. If a co-worker dies, we may feel guilty or angry at that person, at life, or at the medical providers or caregivers if the death was related to an illness. It may cause you to question your own life and how temporary life is with those we love. These are all normal reactions and emotions. Be prepared for grief triggers that may surprise you by bringing up uncomfortable feelings from out of nowhere. A close colleague's death can sometimes trigger memories of previous losses in our lives, as well as fears and concerns about mortality.
- You may find yourself distracted and thinking about the death even when you're not at work.
- Your family may not understand why you are having such an intense reaction to a workplace death and may want you to be the same old person you always have been.
- Going to a party, a family gathering, or an evening of fun and entertainment may not appeal to you; this may be difficult for your friends and family to comprehend.
- Work goes on. Be prepared for reactions such as anger and renewed sadness related to organizational changes that might follow a co-worker's death.

"Like a bird singing in the rain, let grateful memories survive in time of sorrow."

~Robert Louis Stevenson

Be aware of how you may react to a deceased co-worker's replacement. Even clearing their work area may bring up deep emotion. If you feel anger or disappointment about the new person's performance, personality, or work style, consider that your feelings may be less about the individual than your grief about the loss of person they are replacing.

Coping and some things you might do

- If you're comfortable doing so then attend the funeral or memorial service; this gives you a chance to say good-bye and offer condolences to the family.
- Consider a work-place only event. A luncheon or office memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.
- Create a memorial or personal touchstone. As a department, you may consider keeping a photo, card, or special item the person kept on his/her desk as a way to remember. You might also consider putting up a plaque or picture of the deceased in an area as a remembrance.
- Express condolences; a card, flowers or some other expression to the family members of the deceased may be appreciated and may help you feel better.

- Participate in some type of collection. This can be done for a special cause, including the family/children of the deceased, if appropriate.
- Create a book of memories. This can be given to the family as a reflection of their loved one's work life and a way for you to express feelings and memories. It is also a helpful way of letting the family know their loved one was a valued employee and is missed.
- Express your thoughts and feelings to trusted people, sharing may help healing. In addition, for some people it helps to write out thoughts, perhaps keep a journal, as a means of externalizing innermost thoughts and feelings.
- Find support. Talking to a family member, trusted friend, member of the clergy or a trained professional might be useful. Reading about the grief process may help with understanding your own reactions.
- The way you feel immediately after the death and the weeks that follow will change, so be patient and have compassion for yourself. Give yourself and your co-workers time to adjust to the loss. Accepting that for some recovery will be quick and for others it may take more time than others.
- Be kind to yourself and try to focus on the basics of eating healthy, getting enough sleep, exercising, and using positive self-talk.
- Be kind to each other. This is not an easy time for the work unit and many adjustments have to be made, people may not be at their best. Cut each other some slack, be gentle and understanding with one another during this time, and find ways to cooperate to share any additional workload. Avoid giving false comfort to a colleague. Statements like "at least the suffering is over," "you'll get over it in time," or "it's God's will," may make you feel better, but worn out expressions are unlikely to genuinely help. A simple expression of a sorrow shared is usually appreciated, "I'm so sorry," or, "I have some time if you'd like to talk" goes a long way.

Seeking help

If you, a colleague, or a work group needs guidance or support through the difficult time that follows a workplace death and accompanying grieving process then consider contacting the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program. Our community outreach experience and professional expertise in the grieving process is available on request. We are also able to make referrals to a variety of on-campus and community resources. We can be reached at 255-2673, 8:30-5:00, Monday through Friday.

Additional Help

Here are suggestions for additional help that include readings, web-based resources, and Ithaca community resources.

- **Readings:** For a list of excellent books on the topic of grief you might find the titles listed here useful: <https://griefwatch.com>. In addition, **Ithaca Hospicare** has a library with many books and videos which can be borrowed, specific titles may be found here: <https://www.hospicare.org/grief-support/resources/>

- **Web-based resources**

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides much information about grief and the grieving process; their article, "Grief: Coping with the Loss of Your Loved Ones," provides useful information about 'normal' grief and the challenge of handling severe grief, sometimes referred to as complicated grief, and guidance on seeking professional psychological help. This article may be found here: apa.org/helpcenter/grief.

The National Cancer Institute's web site has multiple pages of information that includes topics such as in depth definitions of bereavement and grief, types of grief reactions, factors that affect complicated grief, the treatment of grief, children and grief, and cultural responses to grief and loss. More information about these topics can be found at: cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/Patient/page1/AllPages. The website, **Helpguide.org**, is a non-profit web resource that "can help you make better choices, find healthier ways to cope with problems, and resolve mental and emotional issues." Their materials are current and updated regularly; they collaborate closely with Harvard Health Publications / Harvard Medical School. In particular, they provide information about grief and loss here: helpguide.org/home-pages/grief-loss.

- **Ithaca community resources**

Hospicare provides education about advanced illness, dying, and bereavement; they also have a library of resources which are located at the Nina K. Miller Hospicare Center, 172 East King Rd., Ithaca, NY; 607-272-0212. They offer grief support groups (<https://www.hospicare.org/grief-support-groups/>) and an extensive library and other resources (<https://www.hospicare.org/grief-support/resources/>).

Suicide Prevention & Crisis Service offers crisis and trauma assistance, direct support and community education; they have a 24-hour telephone crisis counseling and information line 607-272-1616 or you can call 1-800-suicide (you will be automatically transferred to the crisis line which serves your area code). They're located at 124 E. Court Street Ithaca, NY 14850. Their website provides detailed information about their mission and services: suicidepreventionandcrisisservice.org.

"For all its intensity, Cornell is a caring community because of the efforts we all make — faculty, staff, and students — to seek help for ourselves and to offer support to others."
—President David Skorton

The Cancer Resource Center in Ithaca offers support & networking groups, financial advocacy, one-to-one information & support, wellness programs, a helping hands program, a full and diverse library, and a boutique. They're located at 612 West State Street, Ithaca, NY 14850; 607-277-0960; HELP Line: 607-277-9410; Toll-Free (NYS): 866-905-7770. Their website is: crcfl.net.