

WHEN GRIEF GOES TO WORK



Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one knows that grief is unavoidable—and unpredictable. There is no timetable for when the process of grieving begins or ends, no right way or wrong way to grieve.

Grief is not restricted to family members or close friends of the deceased. Co-workers and supervisors are often unsure how to process their own feelings of loss and how best to support the bereaved. Particularly in the workplace, grief can pose unique and complex challenges.

Consider what happens when the spouse or child of a co-worker dies. What is the right thing to say or do when the bereaved returns to the office? How does an employer handle such a delicate situation? When a co-worker dies unexpectedly, an employer must deal with his or her own grief and the grief of other employees, all the while maintaining workplace morale and productivity. How does a supervisor go about removing personal belongings from the deceased's work area? When is the right time to advertise the job vacancy?

When these and other questions arise, Hospice of Frederick County (HFC) is a vital resource for the business community. "Many workplaces function like pseudo-families," explains HFC Bereavement Coordinator Denise Watterson. "When a death affects them, they need to know how to react and support. The typical bereavement benefit at most businesses is three days, but grief can last quite awhile," she points out. "In order for people to be productive and be able to keep their jobs, they need to feel supported and understood as they endure their personal tragedy or as they grieve the death of a co-worker."

Hospice of Frederick County regularly receives inquiries from businesses of all types, as well as local schools, non-profit organizations, healthcare providers, and assisted living facilities, regarding grief in the workplace. Hospice responds with a variety of services, offered at no cost, that provide practical and meaningful assistance at a very difficult time.

"We'll go into the workplace to meet with business owners and staff, and we'll conduct seminars or workshops tailored to their specific needs," HFC Director Laurel Cucchi explains. "We can also offer hospice support groups or one-on-one counseling. We'll do whatever works based in that environment," she says, adding that the services are free because of charitable donations to HFC throughout the year. "Our goal is to make a difference in the workplace and in the community at large. We don't tell people what they should do, but we do point out their options and give them the tools they need to cope on many different levels."

Laurel recalls being summoned to a school after a student committed suicide. She expected 30 or 40 people for her session on how to deal with suicide; instead, more than 200 staff and parents attended, all struggling with their own grief and wondering how best to support each other and the students. She has also spoken to groups of employees after a co-worker's unexpected death and helped managers navigate the delicate process of replacing a deceased staff member.

“When someone dies suddenly, it impacts business in very practical ways,” Laurel says. “Employees aren’t working because they’re consumed with what’s happening. How does management say when enough is enough? How do you move people through the tragedy and find ways to commemorate the person who has died? Everyone is watching to see how management handles these types of situations, so it impacts morale as well as productivity.”

“Having outside support from Hospice of Frederick County is vital for supervisors,” Denise adds. “They need to take care of themselves in order to be there for their employees.” In situations where an employee has suffered a loss, Denise recommends that supervisors communicate clearly to the bereaved about work expectations—and include fellow employees as part of the support system.

“When a bereaved individual returns to work, the biggest concern from co-workers seems to be ‘what do we say’ and ‘what if we break down talking to him or her,’” Denise explains. Co-workers’ own anxieties about death and dying are often transferred onto the bereaved, and the bereaved is typically just as nervous about returning to work and “breaking down” in front of his or her fellow employees. “The anticipation on both sides is much worse than the reality,” Denise states. “One of our goals is to help everyone put fears and personal views aside and to understand what grief is and its uniqueness to each person.”

How Hospice Can Help

Employers and employees are encouraged to contact Hospice of Frederick County for more information regarding these and other services, offered at no charge to the community:

- Management training on handling grief and loss issues at work
- Employee workshops and seminars on dealing with grief in the workplace
- On-site consultation and support following the death of an employee or the death of an employee’s immediate family
- Bereavement programs and services at hospice offices
- Referrals for professional counseling
- Recommendations for suggested reading, including *Bereavement at Work: A Practical Guide* by David Charles-Edwards, *Living With Grief: Who We Are and How We Grieve* by Kenneth Doka and Joyce Davidson, *No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger and Injustice after a Tragic Death* by Janice Harris Lord, and *Understanding Your Grief* by Alan Wolfelt.