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Grief in the Workplace

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

The enormous effect grief has on the workplace has gone largely under-reported. Not only does it affect those who experience bereavement; many others are struggling to cope with significant losses—divorce and separation, relocation, job changes, being passed over for promotion, being laid off, injury and illness, retirement. At any given time, a significant section of the work force may be facing down a major personal loss.

The real world can be cruel. Workplace expectations are that the employee will perform and produce, devoid of human emotions and unaffected by personal experiences. In some work environments, the expression of personal feelings is taboo, often interpreted as weakness. Often, the needs of the individual and the goals of the workplace conflict.

While most companies recognize death as an acceptable cause for absence from work, many give only a few days off to help employees cope with the loss of a loved one. Yet, most manifestations of grief do not appear until weeks or months after the event. Bereaved employees may experience a broad range of symptoms that seem uncharacteristic of the person, and they may have high rates of absenteeism, sickness, alcohol and drug use, and accidents in the months after a significant loss.

More and more companies offer employee assistance programs that address issues including substance abuse, marital and emotional problems. They can also help employees cope with a personal loss. Where no program is available, you can often connect with an ongoing grief support program through a local funeral home.

Every manager or executive will eventually be confronted with a death in the workplace. Loss is a fact of life. Grief is the reaction to that loss and must be worked through by the individual in order to heal. Managers and knowledgeable coworkers can support grieving people through this stressful time, while dramatically reducing unproductive behaviors.

Ideas for the workplace:

- Organize lunchtime seminars and training workshops for staff on understanding grief and support for grieving employees.
- Provide contact information for community support groups (often available through local funeral homes).
- Offer access to bereavement counseling resources. ■



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