

Supporting a Grieving Colleague

Say This. Do That.

A co-worker is returning to work after the death of a loved one. You want to be helpful and supportive but you're scared. What should you say? What should you do?



01

Acknowledge the loss.

Leave a card on her desk expressing your condolences. If you knew the deceased, share a story or fond memory. If you didn't, it's enough to acknowledge her sadness.

02

Say their names.

His wife Susan was killed in the accident. Her brother Carlos died by suicide. His infant daughter who never woke up is Becca. No matter how young or old, no matter the circumstances, our dead loved ones have names, even if they died *in utero*. Use them.

03

Ask your manager for guidance.

Does your colleague want you to bring up the loss at work or would he prefer you avoid the subject? Would he find it comforting if you checked in to see how he was doing or would he prefer to be left alone?

04

Tell her how glad you are that she's back at work.

And, if appropriate, acknowledge how hard it must have been to return.

05

Offer to help, and be specific.

For example – *I know you have a lot of client voicemails to respond to. Could I make some of those calls for you?* If you don't know what's needed, ask. And offer some choices. *What do you have hanging over your head that I can help with? I can return calls, draft emails, finish that spreadsheet, etc.*

06

Be aware of the situation.

Is she heading off to a presentation for senior leadership or a product demo with a prospective client? If so, tell her that she's ready and capable of handling the meeting. Remind her of what she does well in those situations. It's not the right time to bring up her loss.

07

Give him grace.

A random occurrence or idle comment could have him in tears or snapping at a coworker. Understand that grief and the emotions it inspires are unpredictable and hard to control, especially in the early days of a loss. Be supportive and understanding, even if you're the target of his anger.

08

If you're close to your colleague, offer to go for a walk or get a cup of coffee.

If she says 'no', keep offering. She may not say 'yes' for a while. She may never say 'yes'. But it will mean a lot to her that you are willing to witness her grief.

09

Be patient.

It's difficult to concentrate when you're grieving. Your colleague may need extra time to complete a project. He may make more mistakes. He might be more emotional. Cut him some slack.

10

Keep checking in.

In a few months or a year, she may seem fine, back to her old self even. Continue to inquire about how she's doing. Tell her that you're thinking about her, especially on the hard days – birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's & Father's Day, the beginning of school, holidays, Fridays (weekends can be lonely). By mentioning her loved one's name, you aren't reminding her that he died. She's probably thinking about him all the time anyway, and she'll be grateful that you care enough to ask.

For more advice on navigating
grief in the workplace, visit
leadingthroughloss.net.



*“This book should be on the desktop
of every C-level executive.”*

—SALLY EDWARDS,
CEO, Heart Zones

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