

Supporting A Grieving Employee In A Virtual World

An employee is returning to your hybrid or virtual work environment after the death of a loved one. How do you ensure he's getting the help and support he needs when the team isn't together in the office every day?



01

Contact your employee as soon as you hear the news.

Express your condolences using more than one form of communication – voice mail, text, Slack, email – to be sure your colleague gets the message. Ask to connect by phone so that you can understand what immediate support she needs, what's appropriate to share about her loss, how you can help. Since the team is working remotely, determine whether there's anything you need to pick up from her in order to cover her projects and assignments.

02

Share the news.

Let the other employees know what's happened, how you and the organization will be acknowledging the loss and the best way for the team to do the same. If appropriate, provide details about the funeral service and invite them to attend. Arrange to have your employee's responsibilities covered until he comes back to work, and instruct everyone to contact you, not him, if they have questions or need more information.

03

Create a re-entry roadmap.

When your grieving employee is ready to return to work, set up a phone or Zoom call to discuss whether she'll need any accommodations (e.g., a temporary reduction in hours, a later start time so she has time to drop the kids off at school, a few hours off each week to attend a virtual grief support group). Review her commitments, responsibilities and deadlines, and discuss what she thinks she can and can't do. For example, if talking on the phone feels hard, ask her to focus on proposal writing or data analysis instead. Encourage her to tell you if anything feels difficult or overwhelming so you can make timely adjustments.

04

Ask for guidance for the team.

Does your grieving employee want his colleagues to bring up his loss on phone calls or during Zoom meetings? Should his coworkers ask how he's doing? How they can help? Or would he prefer they wait for him to bring it up?

05

Educate your employees about grief.

Make sure they have a basic understanding of how to support someone who's experienced a significant loss. Caution them against making some of the more common mistakes such as comparing, ranking or diminishing losses; telling the grieving employee they know how she feels; offering religious platitudes such as "Your son is in a better place" or "God needed another angel." Provide some simple strategies about what to say and what to do, and remind them they have no power to fix the situation or make anything better. That what their colleague needs most is an acknowledgement of what's happened, a sympathetic ear if she wants to talk and specific offers of help to lighten her load.

06

Set expectations. Adjust as needed.

Alert your colleagues that their coworker may show up differently than he did before his loss. He may work odd hours, be less responsive, take longer to get his work done. He may make choices they don't understand or agree with like coming back to work a few days after the death of his husband. Instead of judging, encourage them to offer him grace and understanding. They don't need to approve of everything he's doing, but they do need to support him.

07

Create a check-in plan.

Set up a weekly phone call with your grieving employee. Ask questions like: "How did last week go?" "Is your workload manageable?" "What do we need to adjust or change?" "What are you finding difficult?" "Where do you need extra help or support?" "How can I help you in the coming week?" In between the scheduled calls, check in daily during the early weeks or months to be sure there aren't any urgent issues or challenges that your colleague is struggling with alone at home.

08

Understand that the responsibility for communicating is on you.

Grieving employees often don't realize that they need help or lack the energy to ask. Your colleague may have financial pressures, especially after the death of a partner, that have her feeling reluctant to share how hard it is to be back at work. Don't assume everything is going well. Ask.

09

Give him permission to take care of himself.

Tell him it's okay to have his camera off in meetings whenever he needs to. That he can take a break during the day to go for a walk or to compose himself before he returns a client call.

10

Focus on what needs to get done, not how it gets done.

Your employee may have trouble sleeping and prefer to work late at night. She may have to spend time at her kids' school or dealing with the aftermath of her father's death. As long as the assignments are being completed and the deadlines met, allow your employee the space to work in whatever way is best for her right now.

11

Take advantage of technology.

Create a Miro™ whiteboard and ask everyone to post a note of support for your grieving colleague. Encourage the team to send cards via snail mail since they can't express their concern in person. Allot time during your Zoom calls for people to check in or get to know each other better. Conduct a short Menti™ poll before your next team meeting to get a sense of how everyone is doing. Meet once a month without an agenda so people can learn a new skill or have fun together.

12

Enlist help.

Ask one of your employee's close friends at work to check in with him regularly. Encourage that person to let you know if there's anything she's seeing that you might not be aware of. Ask her to let you know if she notices anything worrisome (e.g., your employee seems withdrawn, repeatedly misses meetings or stops taking care of himself).

13

Be patient.

Your employee may not know what's difficult until she tries it. She may need to leave early on hard days, her loved one's birthday or the anniversary of her child's death. She may need encouragement or reassurance that her work is still up to your standards. She may not be able to collaborate with a coworker who ignores or diminishes her loss. Remember that she's suffering in ways you can't see, and be kind, no matter what.

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

OnTarget
CONSULTING_{inc.}