

Supporting a Grieving Employee

Say This. Do That.

One of your employees is returning to work after the death of a loved one. What should you say? What should you do? How can you ensure that the rest of your team will be helpful and supportive?



01

Make sure everyone in the organization knows about the loss.

Congratulating a new parent on the birth of a baby, only to learn the child was stillborn, is horrifying for both parties. Asking a colleague how his time off was, only to find he was burying his father, is mortifying. Don't assume that everyone in the company has heard the news. Gather your team and tell them in person, if possible. Share whatever information is appropriate (and public) before your employee returns to work.

02

Use the deceased person's name, if you know it.

Her husband Joe died of an overdose. His sister Annie lost her life to cancer. Her child who was killed in the accident is Samantha. Our loved ones have names. Use them.

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Ask everyone to acknowledge the loss.

People can sign a card together or compose their own. Each employee can write a short condolence note which you can collect and leave on your grieving colleague's desk.

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Contribute to a cause your employee's loved one cared about.

This acknowledgment will mean a lot to your colleague and his family.

05

Designate a point person.

Ask your grieving employee who she wants to communicate with, in addition to you, once she returns to work. She might prefer a close friend in another department over someone in the office next door or the HR manager. Establishing a single point of contact means she won't have to communicate her needs, wants and concerns to multiple people who may or may not share the information appropriately.

06

Create guidelines for the rest of the team.

With input from the point person, determine how your colleague wants to be treated when he returns to work. Does he want to talk about his loss or would he prefer to avoid the topic all together? Are there coworkers he doesn't want to discuss his grief with or receive offers of help from? Understanding this will allow you to avoid unnecessary upset or hurt feelings.

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When she returns, tell her how glad you are that she's back at work.

And acknowledge how hard it must have been to return.

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Create a safe, private space.

Grief is unpredictable, hard to control and can be triggered seemingly out of nowhere. If your employee becomes upset, he needs a place to go to compose himself. If he doesn't have an office with a door, make sure he knows where he can be alone for a few minutes. An unoccupied office, a rarely used conference room, a quiet corner, the office of a close friend. Let him know he can also step outside or go for a walk whenever he needs to.

09

Adjust her workload.

It's difficult to concentrate when you're grieving. Your employee may need extra time to finish a project. She may make more mistakes. She might struggle with certain aspects of her job. Ask what she'd like you to take off her plate and what she needs help with. Consider offering a flexible schedule, the ability to work from home or reduced hours until she's able to return to full-time.

10

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 after a loss. Be supportive and understanding, even if you're the target of his anger.

11

Stay flexible.

Talking on the phone could be hard initially and then less so once her customers and suppliers have heard the news. Working on a proposal might take her mind off her loss initially, but after a few months, spending time alone in her office could become too much to bear. She may not know what's hard and what's not until she faces it.

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Continue checking in regularly.

In a few months or a year, he may seem fine, back to his old self even. Keep inquiring about how he's doing. Acknowledge the anniversary of his loss. Offer him the day off that first year, if you can. Know that even if he has stopped mentioning his loved one, it doesn't mean he's not still thinking about her.



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

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