Understanding a co-worker’s grief or illness

At some time in your work life, it is likely that a co-worker will face a serious illness or significant loss. Though you might think that it has little effect on you, if you’re reading this article, chances are good that you’re feeling affected by the experience.



Changes in your co-worker

Dealing with illness or a death in the family are some of the most common problems affecting workplace performance. When someone you work with goes through an illness or bereavement period, you can expect to see changes in their work behaviour including:

Mental lapses
Decreased energy
Difficulty making decisions

- Feelings of anxiety or helplessness
- An inability to concentrate
- Absenteeism
- Social withdrawal
- Personal conflict
- Bursts of anger
- Crying or other unusual workplace behavior

Sometimes, these problems don't surface right away, but appear months after the loss. This is natural. A “delayed reaction” can be part of the grieving process.

What you can expect from a bereaved co-worker

Shock. After the death of a loved one, nature may initially protect people from grief by creating a cocoon of numbness. The full realization of the loss can come much later.

Denial. Though friends or relatives may intellectually understand what has happened, they might not emotionally accept it. Later when the bereaved begins to feel the reality of the death, they will want to reminisce and talk about special moments in the deceased's life.

Withdrawal. When a loved one dies, the wound is deep. Friends and family of the deceased need time to heal, and may seek solitude. This is a healthy and normal part of the healing process.

Anger. This is a normal reaction during grief. It may often be directed at a doctor or individual who caused the accident. If the anger isn't expressed, it may come bursting out in inappropriate ways, at anyone who happens to be around at the time.

Tears. Some people, when they lose someone close to them, are overcome by an enormous sense of loss. A harmless question or comment may unintentionally trigger a crying episode. Again, these feelings are common and have more to do with your co-worker's grief than reactions to your ideas or opinions.

By coming to understand some of what your co-worker is going through, you can become more empathetic and compassionate toward them. For more on how to support co-workers going through this difficult time, see related articles in this archive.