

Coping with the Death of a Co-Worker From the Coronavirus

We spend an enormous amount of time with our co-workers, sometimes more than our immediate families. We work, struggle, share jokes, annoy, eat with, visit, have good and bad days, and develop a history with our fellow employees.

When a co-worker dies, our feelings can often be difficult to manage, especially if you were close to the person or if their death was sudden, unexpected, or tragic. Feelings can be complicated if the death occurred at the worksite, or if your last interaction was not pleasant. Even if the coworker's death was a result of a prolonged illness, it still can hit hard when the news arrives.

When a co-worker dies from COVID-19 complications, this adds an extra level of complications to the grief. You may worry more about your own safety and health, and may even need to quarantine if you were exposed. You may feel angry if the person was unvaccinated. Their family members and your team members may have also been exposed and are at greater risk, needing to quarantine to make sure they are safe. They may even have a family member who is also ill or has passed due to the disease.

Grieving can be challenging for many people, especially in the workplace. Because grief is personal, everyone does it differently in a different time span. How you grieve about the loss of a coworker can seem like a unique challenge. It doesn't need to be. It is grief. And how people grieve at home or work is still grief. Not all employers encourage people to grieve openly or together or have the capacity to take appropriate time off to grieve, as some workplaces just need to keep functioning. We can't shut down a hospital, the bus system, or a hotel so that everyone can grieve well.

But there are still methods that can help you get through the process. Grief is a process that can feel like ocean waves; some small, others feel like tsunamis. The following tips may help:

1. **If you have COVID-19 symptoms or were in close contact (within 6 feet for 15 minutes) with someone who has COVID-19, follow current CDC, DOH, and your employer's guidelines about quarantine, testing, and symptoms.**
2. **Understand that grief is complicated:** Expected or unexpected loss can trigger feelings of guilt, shame, fear, anger, humor, and even a sense of no-feelings. We all grieve differently and it takes time.
3. **Acknowledge the loss:** Whether validated by anyone else, your feelings matter. They may matter only to you, but they matter. You can acknowledge to yourself, and others, the extent of your experience. Something real happened, and you are experiencing the effects of it.
4. **Reach out:** Reaching out to others will help with the adjustment to the space created by the loss. Share memories, speak his or her name, acknowledge shared history. Create a new history that includes the lost person's memory.
5. **Give it time:** Some people may need a few hours, and others may need weeks or longer to work through the loss. Give others, and yourself, space and time to grieve. Grief doesn't end with a memorial service. Adjustment takes time.
6. **Don't judge:** Some people who barely knew the person may be devastated and a best pal might just take it in stride. People grieve the way they grieve. Focus on your own process.
7. **Talk to someone:** If you can talk to your EAP provider, a grief counselor, or someone else outside your work, do so. Sometimes co-workers can't talk about the death with you, and your family at home may not understand the degree of your feelings for a co-worker. A death may trigger other unresolved losses or traumas or memories that you need to sort through.
8. **Avoid clichés:** Saying "he lived a full life" or "she's in a better place now" can be seen as trivial and lacking empathy. Don't force it. It's perfectly fine to say something like, "I have no idea what to say now, I'm so sorry" or "I'm here, that's all I can say right now, but I'm here." Nothing you can say will really help as much as just being present.
9. **Do something:** Perhaps your worksite will send a card or flowers to the family, create a memorial bulletin board, make a charitable donation or launch a memorial scholarship, start a fund for the children of the deceased, or pay funeral expenses. If your company does not support those activities, find what you can do individually, or even anonymously as an appropriate action that will help you cope with your loss.
10. **Don't do something big:** When a death stirs up big emotions, the tendency may be to act on those feelings. Take a breath, get grounded, seek support, find your way to manage the loss you are feeling and recognize that you may be surrounded by other co-workers who are also overwhelmed with their own feelings. This is a perfect time to contact your EAP provider, to have someone "outside" your circle to support you finding your way through your feelings. Don't expect your fellow co-workers to be your therapist. They may be having their own challenges with the loss.
11. **Stay safe:** If your grief or preoccupation with a coworker's death is resulting in ongoing disruption of your daily life, or presenting safety hazards for those operating equipment, performing intricate operations, or providing quality services, take a break and let your supervisor know. Reach out to EAP for help in processing your feelings and staying safe!



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