



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE OF THE PACIFIC, LLC

When a co-worker dies -- either unexpectedly or after a long illness -- it impacts people and teams in a variety of ways.

### Effects on Individuals:

Employees working in departments who have lost a staff member due to death may experience a number of feelings over the days and weeks following the death. Strong personal bonds are often formed within work groups, and the experience of grieving a co-worker's death can be profound. The intensity of reactions will vary among individuals, but the following experiences are common:

- Numbness, shock and disbelief
- Decreased concentration and memory
- Increased anxiety
- Sleep disturbances, fatigue
- Change in eating habits
- Sadness, tearfulness
- Headaches, muscle tension, stomachache
- Irritability, frustration
- Depression, emptiness

### Effects in the Workplace:

Departments which have recently experienced a loss due to death are presented with a number of issues. There may be difficulties with productivity and attendance for those most affected by the loss. If new information about the deceased emerges at the time of death, or if events surrounding the death are upsetting, some employees may be shocked, anxious or confused.

Decisions about the deceased employee's possessions, work place and job responsibilities will have to be made; it is important that these decisions are made with a sensitivity for all those affected. There might be feelings of guilt, resentment or uneasiness for staff members who assume roles previously handled by the deceased co-worker. Also,

## When a Co-Worker Dies

certain work situations may serve as reminders of the loss, and may trigger grief reactions unexpectedly.

It is important to understand that the emotional environment at work will be changed for a period of time, and that everyone will have their own unique reaction to the loss. Acknowledging and discussing the impact of the death can help with the process. In addition to offering counseling services for individuals, your EAP can help provide facilitators to lead discussions in departments who would like to meet as a group.

### Things to do:

- Be aware of each other.
  - If it appears that someone is having a serious problem coping with the death, express concern and encourage them to seek professional assistance through the EAP.
- Accept that work may be affected.
  - You and your co-workers' job performance and interactions may be affected by the stress. In time things will return to normal. If the death is suicide, homicide, unexpected or occurred in the workplace, the emotional trauma experienced will be more severe and the need for outside help will be greater.
- Contact the family of the deceased.
  - Consider sending cards, flowers or other such gifts, such as a book of memories written by the staff, to a surviving spouse or child.
- Attend or organize a memorial service.
  - Whether conducted on or off the work site, a memorial service can be another important step for acknowledging feelings and coming to terms with the death.
- Consider establishing a memorial at work.
  - Buying a bench or planting a tree are examples of ways to honor the deceased.

### Employee Assistance of the Pacific

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