

THE Advisor

Providing Support After a Loss



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Knowing how to support employees who are grieving may be challenging, especially when the loss impacts the workplace.

The individual needs of a grieving employee may vary depending upon several factors, such as the person's support system, coping skills, past losses, and how close they were to the person who died. Common emotional and behavioral reactions include:

- Shock or numbness
- Second guessing or feeling responsible
- A sense of helplessness
- Crying, agitation, anger, or rage
- Difficulty concentrating
- Change in work performance
- Withdrawal from others

If an employee is grieving a family member or loved one:

- **Be empathetic.** Ask how the grieving person is doing. Listen to what they have to say and validate their feelings. Being supportive and expressing concern will let the person know that they matter because of who they are and not just the work they do.
- **Be sensitive to reactions.** Most emotional and physical responses are normal, and some may be intense. Keep in mind that the person's loss may be outside your own experience. It is not your place to judge how the person navigates the grief process.
- **Be respectful.** Ask the person their preferences before releasing any information about a major loss. Keep the announcement to a simple statement that informs staff that the person has lost a loved one, outlines any schedule adjustment, and expresses the team's support. While the grieving person may choose to share details about their loss or visitation or funeral arrangements with colleagues, you should not do so without their permission.



People will ask “Does the organization care?” Your availability and concern will provide the answer.

- **Recognize the impact on your team.** Other members of your team may be directly affected by a colleague’s loss due to personal friendships, family connections, or ties within the community. Make every effort to honor requests for time off to attend a funeral or memorial event.

If the person who has died is a member of your team:

- **Be available.** Reach out and ask how your team is doing. Listen to and validate feelings.
- **Communicate.** Shut down speculation by distributing factual information on a frequent basis. If your team is working remotely, set up a virtual lunch or

meeting. Remember to protect the deceased employee’s privacy.

- **Don’t erase the employee.** Consider keeping the person’s workspace as a memorial for a time. Talk to HR about how to respectfully manage the hiring process for the position.
- **Remind your team about LifeMatters.** LifeMatters is available to your team and their families 24/7/365.
- **Take time for you.** Set aside time to acknowledge your own feelings. Role model healthy self-care strategies.

Grieving is a process, and there is nothing you can do to make it “all better.” Listening and showing you care will help your team weather this difficult time.



The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to assist with any management concern. Call 24/7/365.

How Do I Say That? Addressing a Personal Crisis

A manager is often the first person in the workplace to be notified when a team member loses a loved one, has been diagnosed with a major illness, or is injured in an accident. Human Resources staff often speak with an employee early in a personal crisis as well.

Conversations of this nature could stir up reminders of your own experiences with grief, loss, or illness. It is important that the employee walk away from the encounter feeling supported by the organization, regardless of your own personal reaction. These tips will help you handle these discussions with sensitivity and compassion:



The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can guide you through the best way to provide support during a personal crisis.

- 1. Plan ahead.** Keep tissues and bottled water in your office for in-person meetings. For phone calls, consider creating a script or making a list of helpful phrases.
- 2. Listen.** Someone who is coping with a catastrophic life event may be emotional or agitated. Try “letting the fizz out of the bottle” by allowing the person to speak for a few minutes without interruption.
- 3. Express empathy.** Acknowledge that the person is in a frightening or life-changing situation.
- 4. Avoid platitudes.** Some phrases, while well-intended, may come across as trite or insensitive. Avoid comments like “I know how you feel” or “Everything happens for a reason.”
- 5. Redirect the conversation.** If the employee will need to take a leave of absence or temporarily change their schedule, ask for any pertinent details and explain what benefits the organization will provide. (Keep the relevant HR policy on hand and refer the employee to HR as appropriate.)

Sample language: “I’m sorry. I would imagine you feel overwhelmed.”

Sample language: “Our team is here to support you. Please update me when you know your schedule so I can arrange coverage.”



LifeMatters offers 24/7/365 assistance with management concerns. We're here to help.

6. **Remind the person about LifeMatters.** LifeMatters can help you cope with your own feelings about the conversation as well.

Sample language: “LifeMatters is available to assist you and your family members with practical resources and emotional support.”

7. **Follow up.** Someone who is upset may have difficulty retaining information. Follow up with an email or handout summarizing benefits and other key details. Reiterate that you care about the person’s wellbeing.

Management Consultation

Whenever you need it, as often as you need it. Reasons to call:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee’s personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters®

1-800-634-6433

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