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Workplace Grief: What's New, What's Needed

Grief is a fundamental human experience, affecting at least one in 20 workers every year. It has a profound effect on mental and physical health, absence, and productivity.¹ COVID-19 made this experience more common while simultaneously interrupting cultural traditions and social supports that help people get through the loss of a loved one.

Employers can help by understanding that the grieving process is different for everyone. Feelings of numbness, despair, denial, and helplessness are common soon after the loss, as are poor memory, difficulty concentrating, and obsessive thoughts. The emotional stress can lead to mental and physical health problems; heart attacks are 20 times more likely during acute grief.² The symptoms of grief usually resolve over a few weeks or months through a process of gradual acceptance and adjustment to a new reality. Social support is key to recovery and restoration of a new normal state.

Complicated grief refers to a prolonged grieving process, affecting about 10% of all griever, but has become more common during the COVID pandemic. Brief, grief-specific cognitive therapy can shorten the length and severity of complicated grief and is more effective than traditional therapy or medications.³ About 5% of griever develop clinically significant depression, are unable to function, may have frequent

thoughts of suicide, and can be at high risk of self-harm. They require rapid referral for psychiatric evaluation and care, but often respond well to medications and counseling.⁴

Supervisors often don't know how to help a grieving employee, which can lead to avoidance, contributing to an employee's sense of alienation. The best approach involves respecting individual preferences. Ask the employee what would be most helpful in terms of staying or leaving work, acknowledging the loss at the workplace, employer presence at the funeral, and getting help with estate and other issues.^{5,6}

Supervisors may be the first to recognize serious grief-related depression, for which a referral to an employee assistance program or treatment can be very helpful. For employees who have elderly loved ones, a timely resource can help them communicate about important decisions in advance — easing their passing in the future and preventing complicated grief for the survivors.⁷ Advance estate planning can also reduce the administrative burden on survivors.^{8,9}

Bereavement leave is typically allowed for just one or two days — just enough time for a funeral or memorial. But research shows that this is not enough time away from work for most who have lost a loved one. Many are forced to see a doctor so they can use

sick time to take care of their emotional health and necessary arrangements. More companies today are considering an individualized approach, with policies that allow for extended bereavement leave and gradual return to work for those who need it.¹

Grief at work is a common and challenging problem — and an area in which employers can make a significant difference in helping their employees.

References

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