



# Loss of a Co-Worker

## Death and Loss

Some critical incidents involve death, and individuals experience personal loss upon the death of someone known to them, such as a family member, friend, acquaintance, peer, or other co-workers.

What makes death traumatic is not so much that it is sudden or unexpected; but instead, death challenges our “assumptive world.” Many of us expect the world to be predictable and familiar, based on what we have experienced. Certain deaths challenge those beliefs. Naturally, sudden deaths can be traumatic. Such deaths intrude upon our thoughts of predictability, safety, and benevolence.

Interestingly, some people may experience similar feelings upon the death of those unknown to them, such as those who share the same job in the wildland fire culture.



## Learning of a Death

The grief response following sudden loss is often intensified since there is little to no opportunity to prepare for the loss, say good-bye, finish unfinished business or prepare for bereavement. Families and friends are suddenly forced to face the loss of a loved one instantaneously and without warning. This type of loss can generate intense grief responses such as shock, anger, guilt, sudden depression, despair, and hopelessness.

A sudden tragic event shatters our sense of order and thrusts us into a world forever changed. Survivors of sudden loss may experience a greater sense of vulnerability and heightened anxiety. The safe world we once knew, no longer exists. We fear for ourselves, our family, and our friends. Survivors can become overwhelmingly preoccupied with thoughts that it might happen again.

*You may be surprised by the strength of your reactions, or on the other hand, you may be concerned that you have a minimal response.*

*However you are experiencing your grief, remember not to judge your reactions and try not to judge the way your colleagues are reacting.*

## Common Reactions

Within the first few weeks to months after a death, you may find yourself riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. Most people go through these stages not in linear steps but unpredictable waves, moving from one stage to the next and sometimes shifting back. Some people experience certain stages but not others. Here are some common, typical grief reactions:

- **Shock and disbelief.** You may experience the numbing and disorienting sense that the death has not happened. This feeling can last from several hours to several days.
- **Anger.** You may feel anger at the deceased, yourself, others, and your God or higher power for what has happened.
- **Guilt.** You may blame yourself for not doing or knowing more or dealing with any "unfinished business" that you had with the deceased.
- **Sadness.** You may experience a deep sense of loss and find yourself crying. There may be a tendency to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities or feel helpless or hopeless. Other recent or past losses may come back to you to deal with again.
- **Fear.** There may be anxiety or panic, or worries about the future. It may bring up your concern about your sense of mortality.
- **Acceptance.** Finally, hopefully, you adjust to the loss and move on from it while still honoring your deceased's memory.

## Things That You Can Do

- **Share your feelings and Acknowledge the loss.** Your other coworkers may be experiencing the same emotions you are. Mutual support can help everyone get through the grieving process.
- **Memories of the deceased are always present at work.** It can help to have a way for everyone to share openly.
- **Take the tasks of daily living at your own pace.** Feelings of grief can be mentally and physically exhausting.
- **Expect setbacks.** Grieving is a process. So is healing. Try to be kind to yourself if you feel like you are not "getting over it," or you think you are not "dealing" well with your loss. It is also okay not to know what you need or not articulate it to yourself or others.
- **Honor the lost coworker.** Consider honoring the person who died appropriately, e.g., collecting money for a charity, creating a memorial book or bulletin board, or sending a letter to the deceased's loved ones.
- **Limit Alcohol or Other Substances.** Self-care is vital during times of stress. Make sure to eat well. Get regular exercise and the sleep you need to feel rested.

## Management Considerations

Feeling cared about and supported in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event is hugely important in the healing and recovery process.

Managers are often the first to inform staff of the sudden death, and along with normal grief reactions, unexpected death can be shocking and sometimes traumatizing. How leaders deliver this information is vital. When employees are on vacation, out sick, or otherwise out of the loop about office news, make sure they are informed before they return to work.

People cannot return to productive work immediately upon hearing about a tragedy or death. If you expect them to continue working, people will make errors and mistakes because they are distracted by the events or information. Don't pretend. Just tell people that it is all right to focus their energy on the happening. If you do this, most individuals return to productive work more quickly.



## Funerals and Memorials

If the events are out of town, people may want to find ways to memorialize the loss locally. However, be mindful that each family is different and may choose not to publish funeral or memorial event information.

A final way to honor your lost co-worker is to carry on their professional legacy by setting up a scholarship to benefit students who want to do similar work, provide an annual award in their name, or another way to remember and honor them that is appropriate for the particular work setting.

People experiencing grief may experience an accompaniment of **physical reactions** such as:

- Fatigue
- Sleep disruption
- Appetite changes
- Tenseness, aches, and pains

Common **psychological symptoms** include:

- Feeling distracted
- Forgetful
- Irritable
- Disoriented
- Confused

## Making Difficult Changes

### Desk and Personal Belongings:

Family members or a close work friend may want to handle the task of boxing up the individual's personal belongings.

### Changing the voice mail message, retrieving and handling messages:

These tasks could be shared or rotated among staff to ease the emotional burden of telling callers that the employee has died. Prepare a brief statement to assist those who reply to calls.

### Removal from Directories, Data Bases, and Other Agency Systems

Deleting" the deceased from the various databases, computer programs, email, and directories can be painful . System administrators may feel that by "deleting" the person, they are being disrespectful or "erasing" the person like they had never lived. Someone not closely connected may be better suited to carry out the task.

**Be aware of the healing value of work.** Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience, and most people can work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma. Ultimately, things need to get back to normal, even if that means a new normal.

### Helpful Resources

[American Psychological Association Co-Worker Loss](#)

[Honoring a Deceased Colleague](#)

[Workplace Grief and Loss](#)

[Mental Health Treatment Locator](#)

[Grief Counseling Locator](#)

[National Critical Incident Stress Management Website](#)

**Produced by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Critical Incident Stress Management Program  
July 2021**