



## Working Through the Stages of Grief

We grieve in distinct stages. Although these steps generally unfold in a particular order, often we take two steps forward and a few back. One moment we may feel angry, and the next, we begin crying or laughing. Our feelings are never right or wrong. The four primary stages of grief are:

### 1. Denial/shock

Numbness occurs and we feel that the news we have received is somehow a mistake. Our first response is very often "No, there must be a mix up." Denial often gets negative publicity, but it does have an important function. Denial protects us until we have a chance to process information. It can be seen as a safe place to be for a few minutes. Denial only becomes problematic if it is present too long and in the face of overwhelming realities.

### 2. Anger/feeling deserted

During this phase, we often become angry with the person who left us. Our language is filled with "If only he had worn his seatbelt." or "I wish he had taken better care of himself." Often times during this stage, we blame the events or illness. We struggle with spirituality and wonder how a higher power could let this occur. No matter how confusing anger is, it becomes a necessary and healthy adjustment and demonstrates that we are moving through the grief process.

### 3. Despair/depression

This feeling can follow the wave of anger we experience. We become sad and feel despondent. Small tasks and concentrating can seem insurmountable. Despair and depression signal to us that the loss is real and is a healthy sign we are not in denial.

### 4. Acceptance/adjustment

When we have enough time to heal, we begin to accept what has transpired and we can make sense of it. This hindsight is often filled with memories of positive and happy times. When we accept the situation, it does not mean we do not feel the loss, and become saddened by it, it simply means we are able to balance the loss and move forward.

## WORKING THROUGH GRIEF

- Take care of yourself; grief can wear you out. Get plenty of rest and eat properly. Do not drink, use drugs or medicate your feelings.
- Accept your feelings as right for you.
- Express your feelings. Don't keep them bottled up.
- Don't make major life decisions while grieving.
- Let yourself grieve at your own pace.
- Know when to seek help; There are intense feelings associated with grief. However, if you are concerned that you are taking too much time to pull through these feelings, seek assistance from a counselor, pastor or rabbi, family or friend. Call your EAP program if you need a chance to meet privately with someone who can help brainstorm with you about resources and options.

## HELPING COWORKERS THROUGH GRIEF

- During the period of grief, the support of coworkers and employers can make a critical difference in helping a colleague cope. It is important to remember that people all respond to death differently; some may avoid face to face meetings, take different elevator or walk down another aisle rather than face a grieving coworker. Often we feel we don't have the "right words" to comfort.
- When helping a coworker, remember that we all have our own timetable to heal. There is no need to be cautious, closed or reserved, Rather, be open and sensitive, and don't feel you must have the perfect thing to say each time. Be able to ask openly what the grieving person needs from you to feel better. You can also offer to:
  - give rides to/from work
  - run errands
  - provide cooked meals
  - help with household chores
- Acknowledge the event; pretending that nothing happened may seem easiest (for you) but won't help the affected coworker recover. Attending the funeral, giving a card of remembrance or sending flowers or a plant may help you indicate your acknowledgment of the death.
- Tell the survivor how you feel. Statements like "I care about how you feel and I am here to help if you need it" can let someone know you are supportive. Don't feel you have to make things better. Don't try to project your feelings on to the grieving person. Don't tell them "I know just how you feel". Don't ask detailed questions.
- Offer long-term support; Sometimes after the initial event of death has passed, coworkers forget and move on with business as usual. Grief can last a long time and often the first anniversary of the death can trigger all sorts of responses from your grieving colleague.
- Offer practical assistance; Renew and restate your offer to help. At the time of death, everyone is being supportive. Two or three months down the road it is just as important to remain sensitive and able to help.

## SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- Don't impose your explanation, "It's God's will" etc.
- Don't encourage the grieving coworker to stop crying.
- Don't tell the grieving person to cheer up.
- Don't rush the removal of the loved ones belongings.
- Don't assume men handle grief better than women do.

Your Employee Assistance Program is available for free, confidential help.



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