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HOW TO SUPPORT A GRIEVING CO-WORKER

For most of us, there will come a time when a co-worker experiences the loss of someone significant, whether that be the loss of a parent, child, spouse, friend or loss through miscarriage. People respond to loss differently. Some find it very difficult to return to work, while others find it helpful to return to a safe environment, among familiar people, and resume a regular routine as best they can while still grieving. The structure of work can help them take their mind off their sadness and mourning and for a little while, help them feel “normal.” But *normal* is a *new normal*. It is hard to find the right words to say to someone who has experienced a significant loss, and when it is a co-worker, it can be even more challenging.

The following are some general guidelines:

1. **What do I say?** A simple acknowledgement is best. A heartfelt “I’m sorry for your loss” expresses empathy. Don’t avoid saying anything because it is uncomfortable, or you don’t want to upset them. You are not reminding them of their loss—it is a constant presence—but ignoring them may cause them to feel more isolated.
2. **Don’t share about your past losses.** We are all different in how we grieve, and what that looks like also depends on whom we mourn. It is not a time to share how you felt or what helped you during your time of loss, instead, say “I can’t imagine what this is like for you.” If they ask you about how it was for you, then they are ready to hear about your experience, and perhaps take comfort in knowing you are on a similar journey.
3. **Ask how you can help.** Often people say, “Let me know if there is anything I can do?” but they rarely check back with the person to see what needs to be done. A grieving person doesn’t know what they need. Make a concrete offer such as caring for children, getting someone to/from the airport for the funeral, cleaning up their kitchen, or helping with shopping or other errands. A co-worker who knows them well might create a list to circulate around with specific things people can do that would be helpful.
4. **There is no better place.** Regardless of how spiritual someone might be, the best place for their loved one is with them. Try to avoid the cliché things people say when someone passes away. If you knew the person who passed, share a kind thought about them. Otherwise, just let them know you are thinking of them.

5. **Timing matters.** Saying “I’m sorry about your sister” as you sit down to a department meeting might cause a grieving person who is barely holding themselves above water, to succumb to another wave of grief. It is not only what you say but when you say it. It is important to offer your condolences at a time that is best for the other person--not necessarily you. Sometimes, the end of the day is better than the middle of the work day. Most importantly, be sincere in your desire to check in with them, and make sure you have time to talk to the person if you are going to bring it up. When in doubt, offer your condolences in private, during a lunch break, or when your colleague isn’t trying to set aside their raw emotions and try to be in work mode.
6. **Don’t ask how they are doing.** Asking forces the grieving person to have to decide whether and what to share, which they might not be capable of at the time. Instead say “I’m thinking of you.” Offer specific tasks you can do for them such as bringing them lunch, taking a walk, or making phone calls for them.
7. **Don’t track their progress.** While we know grief changes over time, you do not “get over” a loss, you learn to live with it. The first year, dotted by first birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries, is always a challenge. People do their best to get through them, and do not want to hear “it will get easier.” They might feel guilty when they’ve managed to set aside sadness for a short time, especially to do something they enjoy. Instead of saying, “Are you doing any better?” or “I’m glad you came to the party. It must mean you’re doing better,” you might try “It’s good to see you” or “I’m glad you came.”
8. **Respect their need for privacy.** Honor closed doors, silence in conversations, or a declined invitation to lunch. Include them in your social plans, and let them decide whether to accept or decline. Don’t assume they will “feel better” if they join you for a dinner or holiday. If they do decline, don’t stop offering invitations. Grief is a process, and where people are in that process changes frequently. What sounds good today might not feel right next week. You do not have to understand, just respect their feelings.
9. **Returning to work is difficult.** Returning to work can be overwhelming, and people may need some extra time off. Your co-worker may experience lack of concentration and memory, tiredness from raw emotions and lack of sleep, feelings of depression and anxiety. This may result in their being irritable and have less patience with others. Recognize they are processing a great deal, and don’t take it personally.
10. **Grief doesn’t end when the casseroles run out.** Perhaps the most difficult time for a bereaved person is once everyone goes home, and life returns to “normal.” When there are no more arrangements to be made, or visits with out of town family, they are left to do the work of grieving. While this is something they will do alone, it can be very lonely. It is at this time when a phone call, offer for lunch, weekly meals provided to a family, or assistance with childcare or shopping is appreciated and conveys a sense of support and caring.
11. **Take care of yourself.** Watching someone grieve and having empathy for them can awaken your own experiences with grief, and trigger old memories and feelings. Take the time to honor your own grief separate from your co-worker. If you find yourself struggling, consider reaching out for some support.