

Dealing with Grief in the Workplace

Grief and loss are part of life. Three years of a global pandemic focused new attention on that fact, and brought to light the many ways grief affects people and workplaces. But most leaders never learned how to deal with grief at work—and sometimes, people cause harm when they want to help. Here's a primer on what to do—and not to do—when someone on your team is grieving.

Finding Words

Don't Say

...

(nothing)

Instead Say

I don't know what to say, but I want you to know I'm here to support you.

Don't Say

At least they're in a better place.

Instead Say

That sounds so tough.

Don't Say

How are you doing?

Instead Say

How are you doing right now/today/this week?

Don't Say

I'm so sorry for your loss. I know exactly what you're going through because of [personal story].

Instead Say

I'm so sorry for your loss.

Don't Say

You seem like you're struggling. You should take more time off right away.

Instead Say

How can I best support you right now?

Don't Say

Don't worry about it! We've got everything covered.

Instead Say

We'll take care of your duties while you're out. We'll miss you and look forward to your return when you're ready.

Don't Say

Carol's still pretty broken up, so we gave her more time off.

Instead Say

We gave Carol a pass on that project. She'll jump back in when she's ready.





Taking Action

- ▶ **Make sure your organization offers the most generous resources it can for employees who experience loss.**
Grief experts recommend people take 20 days off work after a close family member dies. Offer more than the average three days of bereavement leave if you can. Let employees use accrued vacation, sick time, or PTO days as additional leave. Share information about counseling and mental health resources with your employee.
- ▶ **Ask your team member what support they need.**
Offer flexible work arrangements, like changes in work hours, working from home, and a shift in project load. Let the employee make the choice. Some people find comfort in work after a loss; as long as they don't show signs of overwork, let them work. If the person doesn't know what they need, revisit the discussion later.
- ▶ **Give them space to talk about their loss if they want to, and respect it if they don't.**
Acknowledge their loss and give them the opportunity to share as much as they want. Ask if they want you to tell team members what happened or not, and how much information to share.
- ▶ **Let them know you're thinking about them.**
A food delivery gift card, greeting card, or flower delivery from the team can show support without any expectation for the person to respond. Etsy offers [sympathy cards with nuance](#).
- ▶ **Invest resources to train leaders and teams to deal with grief.**
Even a half-day workshop with a grief counselor who has expertise in workplace issues could make managers feel more empowered and less helpless when a team member experiences a loss.



Helpful Resources.

- [Managers: What Do You Do When a Teammate Shares Their Grief?](#) - Lara Hogan
- [The Consequences of Unacknowledged Grief in the Workplace](#) - MIT Sloan Management Review
- [How to Navigate the Whole-Self Workplace](#) - Quartz
- [The Cost of Dying](#) - empathy.