

How to Help Grieving Co-Workers

Most of us find it difficult to meet a friend or co-worker for the first time after her loved one has died. At these times we'd like to disappear into a hole. Some of us actually go down a different aisle in the grocery store or duck into the file room at work in order to avoid the bereaved.

We're uncomfortable because we don't know what to say or how to act. We want to say the right thing that will cheer her up and make her feel better. Well, that's impossible! Let me suggest ways to handle this situation.

Recognize that nothing you can say or do will make it better for her. Let go of that impossible expectation of yourself. Her loved one is dead and she hurts. A few words from you aren't going to stop the pain.

Actually, statements such as, "At least he's not in pain anymore" or "You're lucky, I know someone who..." accompanied by a story about someone who is "worse" off, are not helpful at all. These statements minimize her pain and imply that she should not grieve.

Instead, say: "I'm sorry about John/Mary's death." Then be quiet. This allows her to talk about her loved one and tell you how she feels. It also allows her to change the subject if she doesn't want to talk about the loss.

In addition to saying you're sorry, you might put your arm around her shoulder or your hand on her arm. These actions can say much more than meaningless clichés. Your touch says "I care."

If she cries when you talk to her it isn't you who made her cry. She cries because she hurts. Your show of concern might precipitate the tears, but it doesn't cause them. Remember crying is a healthy outlet for sadness. If you feel helpless at your friend or co-worker's tears, simply get her some tissues. This gives you something to do. Above all, don't tell her not to cry.

At later times mention the deceased. Contrary to what you might think, griever's feel good when others talk about their loved one. It tells them that he hasn't been forgotten.

Be patient. Grief is a painful experience that lasts longer than a year. Don't expect your friend or co-worker to be her "old self" right away. Actually, she may appear more upset three or four months after the death than she did at first. This happens because the full impact of the death doesn't hit immediately.

NEVER tell her, "You've got to get over it." With time, supportive friends and good grief work she'll get THROUGH the experience of loss, but she'll never get "over it."

Discomfort with the subject of death and another's pain causes us to avoid the bereaved, but don't let that stop you. Don't hesitate to tell your friend or co-worker that you don't know what to say or how to help. Your concern for her will come through, despite your discomfort and feelings of helplessness.

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