

What to do when a coworker loses a family member

Aetna Resources For LivingSM

You spend many hours with your coworkers and may consider them friends. So when a coworker is grieving, it's normal to worry. You might not know what to say or how to act.

Respect the person's choice for privacy

Let your coworker and supervisor decide how much or how little information to share. Don't speculate. Ask your supervisor if you have questions. Your supervisor can name one person to pass along information on how the person is doing, what is needed and how you can help.

Once the person is back to work, continue to respect his or her privacy. Let your coworker know you are there to listen. Offer to help with duties if you can. It may take some time for this person to become completely productive again.

Keep your coworker in the loop

Some people shy away from a person who has experienced a loss. We don't know what to say or we worry we'll say the wrong thing. Try not to let your fear keep you from offering support. It may be important for your coworker to stay in touch with work life.

Share office business and staff news to keep him or her from feeling left out. Make sure the person is included in key events. Invite your coworker to meetings and other work-related social gatherings. He or she may decline, but the gesture is important.

Offer sincere help

You can also offer help as long as it's sincere and you are able to follow through with the offer. Some companies "pitch in" and offer shopping, visiting or vacation time to coworkers who need the help.

Help with the workload

Talk to your supervisor about extra work. Your coworker may need to take some time off to grieve. You or others may have to fill in for your coworker. It's OK to feel some anger at the extra work, even though you want to be helpful. It may affect your own projects. Your supervisor might not know how much extra work you're doing. Be sure to tell him or her if you've got more than you can handle. Your boss can help share the burden or offer other resources.

Allow time to heal

Your coworker needs time to heal. Grief can be unpredictable and mood swings are normal. So try to be patient. People need to grieve in their own way. After a loss, people may feel:

- Sadness
- Fear and/or anxiety
- Frustration, anger and guilt
- Remembrance
- Reflection

Recovery can take years for some people. The anniversary of the loss might trigger some of these emotions all over again.

It can be hard to see a coworker grieving. But your support can make a difference. Know that sometimes it's the little things you say or do that mean a lot.



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