Helping Co-workers 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. Here are some tips:

- 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”.

- 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.

- Offer long-term support. Grief can last a long time and often the first anniversary of the death can trigger all sorts of responses from your grieving colleague.

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. Call us at 800.236.3231