

When There's Been a Sudden Death

*"Grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on."
(American Hospice Foundation)*

The grief experienced when a co-worker or loved one has died suddenly can be a shocking and difficult experience to manage. Experiencing grief is a normal and natural response to loss - a universal human experience. Yet everyone experiences grief differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and no shortcut around grief.

With a sudden unexpected death, we may have many unanswered questions. Often we are left with no opportunity to say good-bye and little time to adjust or make preparations. We may experience difficulties understanding, accepting and processing the sudden death.

Responses to Death

- Multiple factors influence how we respond to death including our relationship to the deceased, cultural and religious beliefs, previous experiences with death, manner of death, individual mental health history, availability of support systems, and our life experiences. These factors can also impact how we express grief externally (mourn) and adjust to the loss internally.
- When grieving a sudden death we may notice a range of emotional responses including shock, denial, sadness, anger, guilt, confusion, numbness and feelings of unreality. Some may also experience nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, or avoidance of reminders of the death.
- Sometimes when someone dies suddenly we are left with a sense of unwarranted guilt or an exaggerated sense of responsibility. We might have questions of "What if...", "Why did...", or "Why didn't..." which do not produce answers and leave us longing for understanding and closure.
- While grieving, we can also experience physical symptoms. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, poor sleep, fatigue, headaches, body pain, muscle tension, restlessness, and limited motivation to exercise or engage in other activities. It's important to see your health care provider if your physical symptoms are concerning or persist.
- We may experience highly intense, time-limited (e.g., 20-30 minutes) distress called "grief bursts", pangs, or waves. Sometimes these pangs are in reaction to reminders of the deceased such as holidays or anniversaries or seeing personal belongings. At other times, pangs may occur unexpectedly. Over time, many people experience symptoms less frequently, with briefer duration, or with less intensity.
- There is no timeline for the process of grief. If you feel your grief is overwhelming, getting in the way of managing daily tasks, persisting for a long time, or has left you questioning relationships or beliefs, it could be helpful to talk to a trusted colleague, friend, or an EAP counselor.



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Complicating Factors

- Experiencing a traumatic death including loss due to suicide or violence or multiple tragic losses can complicate our grief even further. Those who have a history of depression or anxiety may be at higher risk of experiencing complicated grief.
- Similarly, if a loss cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported, this may increase the risk of experiencing more complex grief. Examples include death by suicide, perinatal deaths, or a covert relationship with the deceased.
- Complicated grief can include difficulty accepting the death; intrusive memories; nightmares; yearning for the deceased; and withdrawing from social contact.

Ways we Express Grief

- The outward expression of grief is called mourning. Some may mourn outwardly with verbal or emotional expression while others process loss internally focusing on problem-solving and task completion.
- There is no right or wrong way to grieve and many will experience both an internal and external experience of grief. It's important to grieve in a way that is natural for you and avoid self-judgment about how you or others are grieving.
- We all manage grief differently. It is important to keep this in mind when seeking to comfort others. What is often most helpful is listening and offering basic and applicable statements of empathy like, "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care", "this sounds hard", or "that sounds difficult".

Workplace Considerations

- Follow appropriate workplace protocol if your team wishes to reach out to either a co-worker or their family. Typically, a human resources representative, your supervisor, or an appointed representative (identified by a supervisor) will coordinate any formal response to either the co-worker or their family. It is important to respect the privacy of the co-worker and the family's wishes.
- If a co-worker is mourning the death of someone important in their life, acknowledge your co-worker's loss with a personalized note or verbal statement. Lack of acknowledgement can create uncomfortable feelings for the co-worker, while too much focus can also create discomfort too. Avoid religious statements or simple reassurances such as "they are in a better place" or "everything will be all right".
- Create a safe space for a co-worker to share if and when they are ready to. When there has been a traumatic or violent death, people can struggle with knowing how to interact with others and may seek isolation or silence. Connecting and talking with others about the deceased in the same sensitive way you would about any person who had recently died is appropriate. You don't have to have the right words or answers for their loss. You can't take away their grief, but you can hold a supportive space for them to be heard.



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- Be supportive of your co-worker as they cope with their loss. If your co-worker is needing support beyond what you are able to provide, seek assistance from your supervisor or gently mention that EAP is a resource they can engage for support.
- If your co-worker's loss is triggering persistent grief reactions for you, reach out to EAP at 877-313-4455.

[American Counseling Association \(ACA\). 2011. Current trends in grief counseling.](#)

[Association for Death Education and Counseling. 2013. Handbook of Thanatology.](#)

[Hospice Foundation. ACAS. Managing bereavement in the workplace- a good practice guide.](#)

[PDQ® Supportive and Palliative Care Editorial Board. 2020. Grief, Bereavement, and Coping with Loss.](#)

[Violent Death Bereavement Society. 2015. Accommodation to Violent Dying.](#)



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