

## Coping with the Loss of a Colleague

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You have just heard the difficult news that one of your colleagues has passed away. Perhaps this death was the result of a long-term illness or possibly it came as a total surprise. As a colleague, you may find yourself initially numbed, possibly shocked by the news and you may experience strong and varied emotions. These initial reactions can be influenced by your connection, closeness with this colleague, as well as your personal history of loss. You may be especially impacted if this news triggers any reactions related to recent losses you have experienced or if you have serious health related concerns about a family member or close friend.

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### What can you expect?

Disbelief is typically the first reaction experienced after learning that someone known to us has died. Periods of sadness and numbness may also be present as we absorb and cope with the news.

As the reality of the loss sinks in, it is possible that you may begin to experience intense emotions such as: sadness, guilt, irritability, and sometimes anger in trying to make sense of this loss. These emotions can vary and shift from one moment to the next. Experiencing emotional swings are part of the grieving process.

You may also experience fluctuating periods of detachment, numbness, a lack of motivation, and difficulties focusing on work tasks. Some people describe feeling as if they are functioning “on auto pilot”.

Everyone’s reaction to loss and how we experience grief is unique to each individual. Colleagues will react and experience grief differently. Your reactions will most often depend on a number of personal factors affecting you at this time.

Grief is often referred to as a “cyclical process”. You may feel like you are progressing through the grieving process and then find yourself sliding back into more intense emotions. Such an emotional ebb and flow is the norm rather than the exception.

You may experience some of the following reactions: change in appetite, sleep disturbances, loss of focus, difficulties with concentration, decision making, and disruption of work tasks.

Experiencing some of the emotions and reactions described above are normal. Talking about them with people you have a connection with will assist you with your coping and adjustment to this event.

It is important to respect your own pace and not to lose sight that there is no one specific way of grieving. There is no specific or “recommended” time to work through a loss.

## What can you do?

- First, do not try to neglect your emotional reactions or minimize, dismiss the reactions of those around you. It is normal to need time to accept the loss and the time required for dealing with a loss is unique for every person.
- Be attentive and supportive to others experiencing this loss, even if you experience the loss differently from your colleagues.
- Give yourself permission to confide and share your feelings with those people you feel comfortable with; this may be colleagues and/or friends and family.
- Stay as active as you can – structured activities and some form of exercise have shown to be very helpful in alleviating various levels of distress. Even 10 to 20 minutes of walking a day can support our recovery. Walking with a co-worker can also lend itself to your mutual well-being.
- Resume your favorite activities, particularly those that energize you, and possibly embrace new activities that may support your wellbeing. Engaging in positive and rewarding behaviors is more within our control than willfully attempting to change our thoughts or emotions.
- As much as you can, reflect on how this event has impacted you and share these thoughts with the people closest to you.
- Even though you will be naturally affected in some way after receiving such unsettling news, we all need to resume our work responsibilities; regaining full capacity and total focus may take a few days for you and some colleagues.
- If after a few days, you are finding it difficult to carry out your job responsibilities, address this with your manager and possibly a trusted colleague.
- Remind yourself about your capacity to draw on your natural resilience to cope and adjust to difficult life events.
- Give yourself permission to move forward and gradually regain your normal sense of self.
- If after a few weeks, you find yourself struggling with the impact of the loss of your colleague, consider seeking support from Optum, Cooper's Employee Assistance Program. You can call 800-972-8976 to access support from a navigation specialist.

Find additional well-being resources at: <https://wellness.cooperhealth.org/>