

# Understanding Your Emotions When a Co-Worker Dies by Suicide

A sudden and shocking incident has occurred. It doesn't seem to make sense. When someone dies by suicide, it leaves us with a range of feelings – guilt, anger, sadness, shame and the Big Question: WHY? It may also affect our sense of well-being. We may fear a loss of control.

Like many people, you may feel like your co-workers are a part of your extended family. You may have spent more time with some of them than with some members of your family. Therefore, a co-worker's suicide can be a significant event in your life and in the lives of fellow employees.

Every suicide is individual and generalizations about the "why's" are futile. There may be no way you can completely understand the thinking of the person who completed suicide. The majority of work that we have to do involves processing our own feelings about the event.

You may experience intense feelings to various degrees, depending on who has died and your closeness to the deceased. The feelings associated with the loss are a natural part of the grief process.

## The Grief Process

Grieving is the process we must go through to reconcile our losses successfully and move forward with our lives. It is not a weakness, but a tribute to the deceased and a healthy response to heartache. Feelings may be so overwhelming that we try to avoid them, but denying or minimizing them only postpones the reconciliation. We must allow ourselves to flow with the feelings and experience the grief process.

Professionals who deal with grief tell us that most people who grieve in a healthy way experience similar emotions in stages:

- Shock
- Guilt
- Emotional release
- Hostility
- Depression
- Hope
- Loneliness
- Readjustment
- Physical symptoms of distress

Everyone in the workplace will not experience the emotions related to their grief in the same way. Their order and intensity can vary greatly and disturb "normal" life to varying degrees. Grief is work and we must give it some time and space to occur.

In the case of suicide, our inability to understand and accept a loss that is inflicted by the person we are losing intensifies and prolongs the process. This is particularly true of feelings of guilt "If only I had..." and anger "How could you do this to me?" about the person we have lost.

## The Grief Journey

The route and length of each person's journey through grief will vary. However, it is important to move in a healthy direction.

## When to Seek Help

There can be intense feelings that normally accompany grief for a period of time (in the case of suicide, unexpected or violent death, this period can be even longer). If you find yourself preoccupied with intense grief feelings, having difficulty concentrating at work or thinking about suicide, you may want to speak with a professional counselor. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help you with a referral.

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