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# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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**DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:  
Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series**

*Strengthening  
the Team*

**Date: August 29, 2022**

**Time: 1:00-2:00 PM CT REGISTER**

# Recovering from the Death of a Coworker

The death of a coworker is a painful experience under any circumstances, and all the more difficult if it was unexpected. Recovery of individuals and of your team itself depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of the grief leadership provided by you—the team’s manager. Effective grief leadership guides members of the team as they mourn and memorialize the dead, help their families and return to effective performance of their duties.

The following guidelines have proved helpful.

## **Provide a private area where coworkers can mourn without public scrutiny.**

Initially, close friends and associates will feel shock and intense grief. If the loss is to be resolved, it is essential for all affected employees to spend time talking about the deceased person, sharing memories and discussing the loss. This “grief work,” which is essential for recovery, is intensely painful when done alone, but much less so when it can be shared with friends. Providing a private area where coworkers can talk together and shed tears without public scrutiny will ease this process.

## **Share information.**

Employees will feel a particularly strong need for information at this time. Managers can show their concern by making a concerted effort to get that information, and share it in a timely manner. Until you get the information, simply admitting honestly that you don’t know is more comforting to employees than not being told anything.

## **Contact employees who are temporarily away from the office.**

Ordinarily, people in a small team are aware of friendship patterns, and will take steps to ensure that those in particular need of comfort are given support. However, problems may occur if coworkers are on leave or travel. The manager and team members may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they don’t get left out of the grieving process.

## **Serve as a role model.**

Managers need to serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If you show that you are actively grieving, but still able to function effectively, other employees will realize that they also can be sad without losing their ability to perform

their duties rationally. You should avoid hiding your own feelings, as this often leads employees to misperceive you as not caring.



## **Consider offering a debriefing.**

Sometimes, a cohesive team can go through the grief process without help. However, if members do not know each other well, or for whatever reason have difficulty talking, a professional person may need to come in and facilitate a debriefing or meeting in which grief is discussed.

## **Consider holding a memorial service, especially if coworkers cannot attend the funeral.**

A memorial service can be very helpful and often is a turning point in restoring a work group to normal productivity. This is not to imply that the deceased is forgotten; rather people find after a point that they can continue to work while grieving.

Consider the following points in planning a memorial service:

- The memorial service should honor the deceased and provide an opportunity to say goodbye. Unlike a funeral, a memorial is not a religious service, and should be suitable for employees of all faiths. Friends may speak about the qualities they admired in the deceased, the person’s contributions to the work and the morale of the group. Poetry or music reminiscent of the deceased might be shared.

- The most common mistake in planning memorials is to plan them at too high a level. Senior officials may want to take charge, to show that they care and to assure a polished product. This approach usually backfires, for example, “The managers don’t care about Sam; they just want to put on a show for the executives.”
- Memorial services are most effective when the closest associates of the deceased are given key roles in planning and carrying them out. Including the right people (in other words, the best friends of the deceased) makes the service more comforting for everyone. If the best friends are too upset to speak, they can take nonverbal roles such as handing out programs.

### Reach out to family members.

Reaching out to the family of the deceased can be comforting for both employees and family members. Attending the funeral service, sending cards, visiting the bereaved family and offering various forms of help are all positive healing activities.

### Support informal rituals.

Informal rituals in the office can ease healing. A group of friends might join together to clean out the deceased person’s desk, or organize a campaign for contributions to an appropriate charity. Sometimes employees may want to leave a particular work station or piece of equipment unused for a time in memory of the deceased. If possible, this wish should be honored.

### Get back to the work routine in a way that shows respect for the deceased.

Returning to the work routine can facilitate healing if the team makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that he or she particularly valued, for example, “I want to show the customers I care, because Sam was such a caring person.”

### Don’t treat a new employee like a replacement for the employee who died.

Reorganizing responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at “Sam’s desk” doing “Sam’s job.”

### Remind employees about the services of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Team members should be reminded that normal grieving can produce upsetting responses such as sleeplessness, diminished appetite and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. Ordinarily, these will subside with time, particularly if the individual receives strong group support. However, some individuals may find these reactions especially troubling or long lasting, and may need to turn to an Employee Assistance Program for professional help.

*Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (1993, December). Recovering from the death of a coworker (Chapter 3). In A Manager’s Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events (OWR-15). Retrieved January 11, 2019, from <https://www.opm.gov>*

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in the Workplace



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed life-threatening events such as natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist incidents, war, or violent personal assaults. People who experience PTSD often relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares. They may have difficulty sleeping or may feel detached or estranged.

PTSD is common in war veterans who have served in heavy combat, but it may also affect civilians. The symptoms of PTSD may improve or disappear with time. In some cases, however, symptoms persist for years. PTSD may occur with or contribute to other disorders, such as depression, substance abuse, problems with memory, and other problems of physical and mental health. It occurs more often in women than in men.

Not all people who experience trauma require treatment. Some people recover with the support of family, friends, or religious leaders. Many benefit from professional treatment for the symptoms that result from experiencing, witnessing, or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic event.

## Symptoms of PTSD

- Intrusion of thoughts, vivid memories, and flashbacks
- Avoidance of situations, activities, or people that are reminders of the traumatic event
- Hyper arousal, insomnia, a constant sense of danger, exaggerated startle reactions
- Emotional numbness, or a flood of emotions
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering information

## Tips for Employers

### **Accommodating Workers With PTSD**

Because of the high number of veterans experiencing PTSD, the U.S. Department of Labor and other federal agencies created a program called America's Heroes at Work to help those with combat-related PTSD return successfully to the workplace. The accommodations below that are part of the program can be useful for employees with other sources of PTSD as well. These recommendations come from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which provides guidance on employing people with disabilities. Needs for accommodations vary widely depending on an individual's particular limitations. Not all people with PTSD will need accommodation, and many will not ask for help.

Examples provided for particular problem areas include the following:

### **Memory**

- Provide written instructions.
- Provide written minutes of each meeting.

### **Lack of concentration**

- Reduce distractions in the work environment.
- Increase natural lighting or increase full spectrum lighting.

### **Coping with stress**

- Allow time off for counseling.
- Assign a supervisor, manager, or mentor to answer employee's questions.

### **Working effectively with a supervisor**

- Provide positive reinforcement.
- Provide clear expectations and the consequences of not meeting expectations.

### **Dealing with emotions**

- Refer to employee assistance programs (EAPs).
- Allow frequent breaks.

### **Panic attacks**

- Allow the employee to take a break and go to a place where she or he feels comfortable to use relaxation techniques or contact a support person.
- Identify and remove environmental triggers such as particular smells or noises.

Additional information about PTSD and accommodations is available at <http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov>.

### **References**

American Psychiatric Association. (2005). *Healthy minds, healthy lives: Let's talk facts about posttraumatic stress disorder*. Arlington, VA: Author. Available at <http://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd>.

Source: Partnership for Workplace Mental Health. (n.d.). *Posttraumatic stress disorder*. Retrieved August 17, 2016, from <http://www.dol.gov/vets/ahaw/>

# Ask Your EAP!

**The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.**

*Q. What are the most important steps for supervisors and managers in helping prevent workplace bullying?*

A. The single most important step for a supervisor to take in preventing workplace bullying is informing employees that the behavior won't be tolerated. Even if your company has an anti-bullying policy, as about half of all companies do, personally stating your position will make a lasting impression. Be aware of the work climate, and do not hesitate to ask an employee you suspect of being victimized about whether they are being bullied in any way. Periodically educate employees about workplace bullying. Also, have a discussion about different types of bullying behavior, because some employees may be practicing bullying behaviors while being completely unaware of their seriousness. Your EAP or HR advisor can offer guidance on education and awareness.

Hint: Searching for bullying prevention materials associated with specific professions may yield a more applicable list of workplace bullying behaviors. Consider a meaningful staff follow-on discussion about the content. Source: [www.myperfectresume.com/career-center/careers/basics/workplace-bullying-in-2021](http://www.myperfectresume.com/career-center/careers/basics/workplace-bullying-in-2021)

*Q. I am a new supervisor. What are some important tips to follow, mistakes to avoid, and considerations to think about to help keep me on track to becoming an effective manager and leader?*

A. Here are a collection of tips worth considering:

- Avoid assuming your position gives you the privilege to be pushy and demanding.
- Admit you need help as a new supervisor, and turn to experienced managers for it.
- Understand nearly everything you say and do is modeling and will be remembered. This includes what time you come in, how late you stay, how organized you are, how you dress, the loyalty you demonstrate to your employer, admitting what you don't know, and whether you practice work-life balance.

- Prepare to discover that being a supervisor is more challenging and demanding than you expect.
- As the boss, you have more control over your schedule, but do not abuse this privilege by doing personal business on company time or taking longer lunch breaks than others do.
- Don't be "invisible," hide behind closed doors, or have your employees wondering where you are.
- Do not borrow equipment or supplies for personal use.
- Engage with your employees. Identify their strengths and yearnings, and then leverage this knowledge to achieve the goals of your work unit.

*Q. On several occasions over the past year, I was told that my documentation was not good enough to support a disciplinary action. Needless to say, I am frustrated. What are the most important issues in documentation for supervisors?*

A. Most supervisors have heard repeatedly that writing "the facts" and details--what, where, when, and who--are the critical parts of documentation. The parts to avoid, of course, are your opinions, analysis, and psychological appraisal of the worker. Less discussed, however, is timeliness of documentation, which refers to the lag time between the incident and when you write it. You may be busy, but as more time passes between an event and documentation, the less accurate that documentation will tend to be and the more likely it will contain judgments and overtones of your emotional response to the incident and the employee's personality. The reason is that you will remember how you feel and emotionally respond to the worker or incident longer than you will remember the facts and details of what actually occurred.

*Information contained in this newsletter is for general information purposes only and is not intended to be specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. Some of it might not apply to your particular company policies and available programs. This information is proprietary and intended only for eligible EAP members. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with Deer Oaks by calling the Helpline.*

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