

**Coping with the death of a co-worker**

Our co-workers are very much like an extended family. We spend most of our waking hours with them, forging special bonds of trust and friendship that are unlike our other relationships.As a result, it's not surprising that a co-worker's death can be  difficult to deal with — especially if you were close to the person or if the death was unexpected. You may feel anxiety and guilt if the death occurred in the workplace or your last interaction with the person was unpleasant. And even if the co-worker's death came after a prolonged illness, you may still experience shock and depression when you hear the news.

**Emotional impact**

How we cope with a loss depends on many factors, from our personal beliefs to the presence of other stressors in our lives. You may find that thoughts of the deceased make it hard to focus on work for a short while. Or you may find it difficult to get back on track, resulting in mistakes that can disrupt an organization's functioning.

During your daily drive to and from work a preoccupation with a co-worker’s death  may cause distractions that could easily lead to a car accident. Similarly, in a production or manufacturing environment, a lack of concentration can present safety hazards for those operating equipment, performing intricate operations or monitoring product quality. In more extreme cases, a co-worker's death may cause you to become tense and irritated. Those feelings can make an already stressful work environment worse and create new problems elsewhere in your life.

**Physical impact**

A strong emotional response to a co-worker's death can have a direct and often negative influence on your physical health, too. Long-term feelings of deep sadness can disrupt your eating and sleeping patterns, robbing you of the energy you need to move on with your life. Grief can also cause people with chronic health conditions, such as arthritis or high-blood pressure, to deviate from their prescribed diet, medication or exercise regimens, with serious consequences for their health.

Prolonged grief frequently leads to depression, too. Depression has been linked to many other health concerns, such as heart disease and stroke. In one [study](http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/170/21/1884?maxtoshow=&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=%22Frank+Hu%22&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&resourcetype=HWCIT),

for example, depression increased the risk of diabetes by 17 percent.1  In another [study](http://stroke.ahajournals.org/content/early/2011/08/11/STROKEAHA.111.617043.abstract), researchers found that depression boosted women’s risk of stroke by 29 percent even after they accounted for other stroke risk factors.2  Trying too hard not to think about a co-worker's death has its own consequences. Those who attempt to lose themselves in their work risk burnout, a state of intense mental and physical exhaustion. Some may turn to unhealthy behaviors to cope with their sadness such as overeating, drinking alcohol or taking prescription drugs.  

**What you can do**

Grief is a natural process that requires time. You may find these suggestions helpful:

* **Share your feelings.** Your other co-workers may be experiencing the same emotions you are. Mutual support can help everyone get though the grieving process.
* **Take advantage of employee assistance programs, if available.** Experienced counselors can offer support and structure to help individuals and groups come to terms with a loss and make appropriate plans for memorials and gestures of condolences to family members.
* **Plan ahead.** If you are a manager, work with your human resources specialists to establish protocols for responding to a worker's death. Issues to consider include sharing information, handling personal effects, allowing time off for funerals and reassigning space or equipment.

**How counseling can help**

Don’t be afraid to reach out for help if you continue to feel overwhelmed or are having problems with ongoing grief. Talking with someone can help you deal with the various emotions and challenges when you’ve lost a person you care about. Reach out to your Employee Assistance Program, a licensed counselor, or the spiritual care department of a local hospital or church.

And remember your EAP: 360-788-6565



Credit: *Thanks to Helene King, PhD, who assisted with this article. American Psychological Assn.*