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When someone experiences a traumatic loss or death of a loved one, we may have many reactions. Those reactions may depend on whether the death was expected or unexpected, of natural causes or violent, suicide, or the result of an accident. There is a range of emotional reactions to death that, while normal, might feel disturbing or uncomfortable.

What should we expect?

Grief can be an unpredictable experience. Some people feel sad, but some may feel angry, anxious, guilty, numb, or some mixture of all of these feelings. These all represent normal responses. Some feelings happen immediately, while others emerge over time. Because grief is a painful but healthy response to loss and an experience that everyone will have at some point in their life, it is helpful to know you have the support of others.

How can I support a coworker?

- Conventional expressions of sympathy are best. Some examples are: “I am so sorry,” “I hope you know how much I care and that you can call if you need anything,” “I want you to know that my thoughts are with you.” These statements are not original or elaborate, but they are appropriate and effective. Keeping expressions of sympathy simple and sincere is the best way to communicate your concern. Don’t feel compelled to offer something you can’t realistically give.
- Acknowledge the loss and also respect your coworkers’ privacy. Honor closed doors and quiet moments.
- Listen. Listening well can be one of the most powerful ways to help.
- Expect the unexpected. Grief can be unpredictable. Feelings and needs can change on a daily basis.
- Recognize that the fear of saying “the wrong thing” is normal.
- If your coworker has not returned to work, identify one or two people who can stay in touch and relay the wishes and needs of that coworker.
- Avoid trying to cheer up the bereaved. There is no way to remove the suffering of a grieving individual, so don’t try. Above all, don’t try to cheer the person up with statements like, “Perhaps, it’s for the best,” “It must have been God’s will,” “At least s/he didn’t linger,” or “Time heals all wounds.” No matter how well-intentioned, statements such as these are insensitive and potentially hurtful.
- Offer a helping hand. During the initial stages of grief, it may be hard for a person to attend to the everyday responsibilities of life. Offering assistance with these things such as grocery shopping, mowing the lawn, or preparing a home-cooked meal are wonderful ways to show your support.

- Recognize your limitations. We often feel helpless when trying to help someone go through a loss. Remember helping others also depends on their willingness or ability to let us in. We are often helping more than we feel we are.
- Take care of yourself.

Extra help is available

If your colleague is bothered by troubling thoughts, having difficulty concentrating, having trouble sleeping, or if they just want to talk further about their reactions, they can call HealthPoint Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to schedule an individual confidential counseling appointment. **Our phone number is 471-3366. The EAP website is <https://eap.utexas.edu/>. We are located in the UTA Building, Suite 2.304**

We also offer debriefings to workgroups who are responding to a loss, by facilitating a time to talk about what is known, what to expect, how to help, and self-care.

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