Dealing with the Sudden Death of a Colleague

The unexpected death of a colleague can create a profound sense of shock and grief in the workplace. Quite often, the sorrow is expressed through words like “we’ve lost a member of our family” because it really does feel that way. In the workplace we spend our days together, form close and caring friendships and share in the joys and struggles of life as if we are an extended family.

The feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to individually process. We do not follow or heal according to a timetable, but over time our emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral or other events is only the beginning stages of grief.

The feelings and symptoms can be different for each of us. They may include shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness and problems with concentration. Often we experience several of these emotions at the same time, but in varying degrees. The extent, depth and duration will depend on how close we were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and our own situation and losses that we have experienced.

A few things you might expect at work:

- **Allow people time to heal** – for many people the news will be extremely difficult to absorb and there may be a decreased focus on work and disrupt business operations. It may event present safety hazards for people carrying out function that require high levels of concentration.

- **People experience grief differently** – you or your co-worker who was particularly close to the person who died, may feel depressed, absent minded, short tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.

- **Creating healthy memories is part of healing** – some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. It is important to respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or want to cope in a different way.

- **A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality** – if a co-worker dies, we may feel guilty or angry at that person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life and how temporary life is with those we love. These are all normal reactions and emotions.

- **A work area needs to be cleared** – clearing the work area of a deceased employee is a polity matter that management need to follow. It is not about trying to erase the person’s memory too quickly.

- **Be aware of how you may react to a deceased co-worker’s replacement** – your anger or disappointment at his/her performance, personality or work style may be less about the individual that your grief about the person they are replacing. Accept that someone new will eventually fill the empty space

- **People will value assistance** – make sure your employees know about the EAP service and any other support mechanisms you have in place to assist them through this challenging time.

- **People will want to share their memories** – allow people time and opportunities to discuss their feelings and share their personal recollections

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**Your EAP is here to help**

Remember the EAP offers support through confidential face-to-face, telephone, video and online counselling for individuals and coaching and advice for managers. For support or advice for yourself or a friend or colleague, or to make an appointment just call your EAP provider, Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), on 1300 360 364.