

Helping a Bereaved Co-Worker with the Loss of an Infant/Child

Experiencing the loss of a family member is very difficult. The loss of an infant is especially difficult. A baby's death is one of the most painful and traumatic experiences parents can confront in a lifetime. Not only have they lost a child, but they have lost hopes, dreams and part of their future, as well as a vital part of their own identity. Nothing can take away the pain a bereaved parent feels at the time of loss.

What the Bereaved Parent May Be Feeling

Anger and guilt are common reactions and usually accompany grief. The first year can be especially difficult, and parents may ask painful questions, such as "Why did this happen to my baby?" or "What did I do wrong?" While there are no adequate answers to these questions, it is important to allow grieving parents the opportunity to express their feelings, and use these questions as opportunities to remind parents of the reality that the loss is not their fault. The process of grieving varies for everyone. Grief can last far longer than expected and has many ups and downs. Additionally, a grieving parent's needs change frequently, and are sometimes hard to detect.

For grieving parents, returning to work can be both a welcome change and a challenge. Returning to work offers familiarity, a return to routines and well-known tasks, a reminder of successes and competencies, and an opportunity to reconnect with social support systems. Returning to work can also give grieving parents brief opportunities to take their minds off their loss and remind themselves of what is still constant and positive in their life. But there are also challenges. Bereaved parents may feel guilty about returning to work, as if this could negate the significance of their loss, or marginalize their love for their child. Bereaved parents also may feel awkward, not knowing how to explain their loss to co-workers, and they may fear co-workers' reactions to their grief. At work grieving parents will experience many reminders of their loss. Family pictures on desks and conversations about children are common occurrences at work. Other co-workers may be pregnant and feel excited about their own future. All of these experiences are normal and can not be avoided. These situations serve as reminders to co-workers of the need to be empathic and acknowledge the loss and grief of the bereaved parent.

Supporting Your Co-Worker

Sometimes it is difficult to know how to express your care and concern for a grieving parent. You may feel awkward and uncomfortable around the bereaved parent. You may be concerned about what words to use or what subjects to avoid. Below are ways you can help support your co-worker during this difficult time.

What to Do

- Support them in expressing as much grief and unhappiness as they are able and willing to share with you.
- Listen to them talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to.
- Refer to the baby or child by name.
- Be available to listen, run errands, help with the other children, or whatever else seems needed at the time.
- Be positive and gentle.
- Offer to help in concrete ways. If you say you will call later to check on them, note this on your calendar and follow through.
- Encourage them to be patient with themselves and to understand that with time they will begin to heal.
- Be a friend, letting your genuine concern and caring show.

- Understand that grieving has no time limit and varies from individual to individual both in the way it is expressed and the time required to stabilize.
- Acknowledge the death through visits, phone calls, sympathy cards, donations, and flowers. Even the little things you say or do mean so much.
- Remember important days such as birthdays, the death anniversary, etc. Knowing someone else remembers their child means a great deal to a bereaved parent.
- Find ways to help the parent memorialize the life of their child.
- Understand that your acknowledgment of the loss will not make the bereaved parent sadder than the reality of what has happened to their child.
- Being in the presence of other babies and talking about parenting may cause feelings of grief to surface. It is important to allow these conversations and events to happen. Co-workers can be sensitive to the grieving parent's emotions by empathetically acknowledging their loss.
- Give the bereaved parent time to resume the activities they participated in before their loss.

What Not to Do

- Don't avoid mentioning their loss or the child's name out of fear of reminding them of their pain. They haven't forgotten it.
- Don't avoid the bereaved parent because you are uncomfortable. Being avoided by friends adds pain and isolation to an already painful experience. You can help by caring, by being there, and by being the best friend you can be.
- Don't tell them how they should feel or what they should do.
- Don't allow your own fears to prevent you from offering support to the bereaved parent.
- Don't force grieving parents to talk about their loss. They will engage you when the time is right for them.
- Don't expect grieving parents to be strong, and don't compliment them if they seem to be strong.
- Don't wait until you know the perfect thing to say; just say what's in your heart. And even if you say nothing at all, sometimes just being there brings comfort.

What Not to Say

- "At least you still have your other children," or "You can always have another child." Grief over the loss of one child does not discount the parent's love and appreciation of their living children. Children are not interchangeable, and cannot replace each other.
- "You should be coping or feeling better by now," or anything else that may seem judgmental about their progress in grieving.
- "I know how you feel." Unless you have experienced their loss, you cannot know how they feel.
- "Don't cry." They need to know it's okay to grieve.
- "This may have been the best thing. There may have been something wrong. This was nature's way of taking care of the problem." These statements minimize the loss and can infer guilt.
- "It's not as bad as losing an older child." The loss of an infant is no less painful than the loss of any loved one. Although the infant's life may have been brief, the bond and love that a parent feels for an infant is instantaneous and strong. In addition bereaved parents feel the loss of hopes, dreams and future plans.
- "You'll get over it," or "Time heals all wounds." While it is true that your co-worker will learn to live with their loss, this child will always be a significant part of their life.

What to Say

- “I’m so sorry for your loss.” Refer to the child by name.
- “It’s not your fault.”
- “I’m here to listen whenever you want to talk.”
- “I know you had so many plans, hopes and dreams.”
- “I’m sorry for the pain you are feeling.”

Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.FOH4YOU.com. Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.



Employee Assistance Program

We Care, Just Call

1-800-222-0364

1-888-262-7848 TTY Users

www.FOH4YOU.com

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