

Supporting a Grieving Co-Worker After the Loss of a Child or Family Member

Grief doesn't stay home when a co-worker returns to work. When someone loses a child or another family member, they often come back to a place that doesn't fully understand what they're carrying — where meetings still happen, deadlines still loom, and everyone is unsure what to say.

As a co-worker, you may never have met the person who died, and you may feel like you have no right to say anything at all. But you don't need a close connection to the loss to offer real support. What your co-worker needs most is simple: to be seen, to not be avoided, and to know people remember.

Losing a child is often described as one of the most profound losses a person can experience — grief that doesn't resolve on a timeline so much as it changes shape over years. The loss of a spouse, parent, or sibling carries its own weight too. However the loss is described on paper, the person grieving it needs the same things: patience, presence, and permission to grieve in their own way.

You don't have to have the right words. The following tips may help:

- 1. Acknowledge the loss:** Say something simple and direct, like “I heard about your loss, I'm so sorry.” Don't wait for the perfect words — silence and avoidance feel worse than an imperfect sentence.
- 2. Say their name:** If you know the name of the child or family member who died, use it. Speaking their name tells your co-worker that this person mattered, and that you remember them as a real person, not just as “the loss.”
- 3. Skip the clichés:** Avoid phrases like “everything happens for a reason,” “they're in a better place,” or “at least you have other children.” These minimize the loss, even when well-intentioned. “I don't know what to say, but I'm here” says more.
- 4. Offer something specific:** “Let me know if you need anything” puts the burden back on them. Instead, offer something concrete — cover a shift, bring a meal, take a task off their plate, or offer to drive them somewhere.
- 5. Go through the right channel:** Before organizing a card, meal train, or collection for the family, check with your supervisor, HR, or EAP. It keeps support well-timed, coordinated, and respectful of what the family actually wants.
- 6. Let them set the pace:** Some people want to dive back into work; others need to ease in slowly. Don't assume, and don't judge either choice. Grief doesn't end when bereavement leave does.
- 7. Expect the long haul:** There is no timeline for this kind of grief, especially the loss of a child. The weeks after people stop asking can be the hardest. Check in a month later, and again after that — not just the first few days.
- 8. Watch for the “firsts”:** Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and the one-year mark can bring grief back to the surface even when things seem to have settled. A quiet card or a simple “thinking of you today” means a great deal.
- 9. Notice if they need more support:** If your co-worker seems overwhelmed, unsafe, or unable to function at work, gently encourage them to reach out to their supervisor or EAP. You don't have to fix it — just help them find the next step.
- 10. Take care of yourself too:** Supporting someone through this kind of loss can bring up your own grief or feel heavy to carry. It's okay to talk to your EAP as well — you don't have to have experienced the same loss to be affected by it.