

# Experiencing Death in the Course of Your Work



**You may have been impacted, either directly or indirectly, by the death of someone during the course of your work duties. You may find yourself initially numbed, possibly shocked or you may experience other strong and varied emotions. These initial reactions can be influenced by your level of involvement with the deceased, as well as your personal history of death and loss. You may be especially impacted if this event triggers possible reactions related to other work based deaths, recent personal losses, or if you have serious health concerns about a family member or close friend.**

## **What can you expect?**

Depending on your experience with death through your work role, you may experience an initial phase of disbelief or shock, especially if the death was unexpected. This can be a common reaction no matter how often you have had to deal with a work-related death. Periods of numbness and/or sadness may also be present as you absorb and deal with this event. These reactions are most often more intense when the death was not anticipated, involves a child or

person that you worked closely with, or if you are experiencing the accumulative impact of several work-related deaths over a particular period of time.

It may take several hours or days to be able to assimilate and accept what has happened. Even if the death was somewhat expected, accepting this kind of news will often be difficult for most people.

As the reality of the death sinks in, it is possible that you may begin to experience a range of emotions such as: sadness, guilt, irritability, and sometimes even anger when trying to make sense of the death. You may also experience some of the following reactions: changes in appetite, sleep difficulties, loss of focus, concentration problems, difficulties with decision making, lack of motivation and possible disruption of work tasks.

Not everyone will experience strong emotional reactions. However, those that do may find that these emotions can vary from one moment to the next. Experiencing emotional swings is normal and is often described by people as feeling like they are on an “emotional roller-coaster”. Other people describe feeling as if they are functioning “on auto-pilot”.

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**Need more information or assistance? All calls are completely confidential.**

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## How can we experience these events differently?

As mentioned, everyone's reaction to a death and how we respond to these experiences is unique to each individual. Your co-workers may react and experience such events differently than how you are reacting. Your reactions will most often depend on a number of personal factors affecting you at this time.

If you are part of a post-death operational debrief or investigation, you may also experience other emotions related to not being able to save the individual/s that died. Any post-event enquiries may trigger fear of blame; this can create considerable stress and, for a brief time period, may affect your work performance.

## What can you do to support your own recovery?

- **Pay more attention to your feelings** and reactions than to the event itself.
- **Do not judge or blame yourself.** Make every effort not to criticize yourself for having these reactions or blame yourself for the event. Be patient. Think about how you would support a friend in this situation and treat yourself the same way.
- **Take the time to talk about your physical and emotional reactions** with someone close to you like a friend, spouse/partner or family member. You can also turn to co-workers.
- If you feel personally/deeply affected, **try to differentiate what part of your life was touched; foster a balanced perspective between your personal and work life.**
- Even though the possible occurrence of death is a reality within your work environment, **remind yourself that your work is a source of fulfillment and meaning.**
- **Let your family, colleagues and friends know how they can best support you** during your period of recovery. If they are doing something unhelpful, give yourself permission to let them know.

- **Engage in some healthy activity or physical exercise within twenty-four hours** following the event, no matter how light it is.
- **Find something that will help distract you** from thoughts about this difficult workplace event.
- **Take time to rest**, maintain good sleep and healthy eating habits.
- **If your levels of stress or emotions become overwhelming, consider seeking professional support**, such as the Homewood Health EFAP program.

## How can you support co-workers?

- **Convey non-judgmental and compassionate responses** to different reactions expressed by co-workers.
- **Accept that your co-worker's reactions** may be different than yours. Remember that each person has a unique connection with the event and has their personal response to make sense of the event.

## How can you reflect on this experience?

If you reflect on your work, the possibility of being exposed to death might be in direct connection with the mission of your organization and workplace. Despite this thought and these potential difficult occurrences, try to focus on the meaningful aspects of your role and the value that you bring to the workplace in carrying out your job responsibilities.

Always respect your own way of dealing with these difficult circumstances, as well as accepting your personal pace of recovery, following such workplace events.

What can often be helpful after a distressing event is that many people may learn something about themselves or others. This reflection can lead to people focusing on what matters most in life.

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