

Dealing with Grief in the School An Administrator's Guide

When loss occurs in the workplace, we may notice certain behavioral or emotional changes in ourselves and in work colleagues. During this time of uncertainty, staff typically displays a number of different signs and symptoms. These symptoms can result in decreased productivity and focus in the workplace.

Staff signs to watch for:

- Anxiety or nervousness
- Agitation/quick temper
- Poorly prepared or incomplete work
- Lethargy
- Confusion or forgetfulness
- Frequent breaks
- Fear of the future
- Withdrawal from other colleagues
- Lack of focus
- Poor concentration
- Indecisiveness
- Depression
- Signs of alcohol/drug use
- Frequent conversations about the deceased

The majority of these signs/symptoms are a normal part of the grieving process and generally improve after a couple of weeks. However, if you see these signs persist it may be an indication that the employee is struggling to come to terms with the loss.

What can you do to help your staff through this difficult time?

As an administrator, you can have a profound effect on your staff by acknowledging your awareness of stress and anxiety, and by showing concern for a staff member's well-being. Many of your staff will be looking to you as a source of strength, stability and guidance. You can help your staff, and yourselves, through this period by keeping in mind the following guidelines:

- Listen and be supportive of your staff. Avoid advice giving. Focus on hearing your staff's concerns.
- Be calm and supportive of your staff. Your staff will respond to and follow the example that you set.
- Encourage discussion of concerns but during appropriate times, such as lunch or after work.
- Be understanding if your staff's focus and efficiency is not at optimum levels during this period.
- Keep to routine as much as possible.
- Ask your staff what would help them through this time.
- Do not dismiss a staff member's concerns with statements like, "It's not so bad", or "You should be over this by now."
- Be clear and honest about the limits of your ability to help. Do not take everyone's problems as your own and do not feel like you have to have a solution for every problem. Refer your employees to the employee assistance program, community counseling resources. Another very helpful resource is the NJEA Aid Helpline, at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care. They can be reached at 866-243-6532.

Finally, be aware of your own feelings and concerns during this period. Do for yourself the same as you are encouraging your staff to do. Taking care of staff's needs can be difficult so be mindful if you are experiencing any significant behavioral or emotional changes, such as those mentioned above and seek assistance promptly.

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