

The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from  LifeSolutions

“One of our staff recently died in a car accident. We were all upset. When I called EAP to request an on-site grief debriefing and counselor. EAP advised against it and, instead, coached me on how to offer support to my employees. It turned out okay, but I am confused ... isn't it important to provide on-site grief counseling? I thought that was what you were supposed to do.” The loss of an employee to illness or sudden death is always painful in the family-like environment of a close-knit workplace. Managers and supervisors usually bear the burden of consoling staff even as they deal with their own emotions of grief and loss. They are often unsure how to best help employees deal with feelings of shock or sadness while maintaining the ongoing functioning of the workplace. The October and November issues of *The Successful Supervisor* will focus on “Responding to Grief and Loss in the Workplace.” Some material is adapted from *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*, by George A. Bonanno, Basic Books, New York, 2009. As always, we are interested in your feedback. Please e-mail EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com, or contact an EAP account manager at 1-800-647-3327.

Debra Messer MA, CEAP, LifeSolutions

It has become commonplace to call in outside support (mental health providers, social workers, EAP, etc.) to provide debriefings and/or grief counseling for employees who have experienced the death of a co-worker or someone closely related to their work unit. This is based on two beliefs: (1) that employees could potentially be traumatized or suffer prolonged grief if no immediate intervention is made, and (2) that it is important to acknowledge the seriousness of the event by stepping in quickly to alleviate acute emotional distress. Interventions are offered in the hopes of stabilizing and calming workers, reducing their grief, and warding off future problems. Unfortunately, what is intuitively intended as a compassionate and helpful response is not necessarily the best way to help grieving staff.

Debriefings and Counseling Do Not Always Help Grieving People

Interventions are helpful when used at the right time for the right reasons. They work best when the recipient has ongoing mental health issues that are causing suffering or dysfunction. The basis for the ongoing problems is identified and an appropriate intervention is provided. Herein lies the first problem: **the vast majority of people who suffer a loss and are grieving do not have mental health issues and do not need any kind of psychological intervention.** Sad as it is, death is a natural part of life. Most human beings are well-equipped psychologically and emotionally to cope with it. While they may experience acute emotional distress at the time of the loss, this is normal and does not mean that the person is in need of an intervention beyond the comforting one would normally offer in a time of loss.

“Why not just do it anyway ... is there any real harm? That way if someone is having a problem, we can help them.”

Any intervention, particularly if unnecessary, can interfere with the natural recovery process and can be harmful. Consider the following points:

- ◆ **Every individual grieves differently.** There is no right or wrong way to feel and no specific stages that a person must go through to successfully navigate the process.
- ◆ **An intervention may not honor individual process.** Some employees welcome the opportunity to talk; others find it disruptive and recovery can be derailed. A study by Mayou, Ehlers, and Hobbs, “Psychological Debriefing for Road Traffic Accident Victims” (2000), revealed that potentially traumatized persons who received a one-hour debriefing

were *more* symptomatic 3 years later than the participants who received *no* debriefing. The most distressed persons receiving the debriefing were still highly distressed 3 years later in comparison to the distressed persons who were *not* debriefed. That group experienced remission of symptoms within 4 months post-accident. **The conclusion was that the debriefing had actually interfered with the recovery process.**

- ◆ **Death and loss are a normal part of life.** The rush to send in a clinical team can pathologize normal responses. Employees need consolation, not necessarily counseling. This consoling is best provided by those closest to the grieving employees.
- ◆ When an “expert” counsels employees on the potential problems they may experience, **symptoms can be exacerbated or planted.** If the expert talks about “stages” the employee can expect to go through, those not experiencing it that way may worry they are not “doing it right.”
- ◆ **Acute sadness following a loss serves a valuable purpose,** allowing people to “set time apart,” make sense of what has happened, and begin healing. Employees should be allowed time for their feelings and not rushed through them in an attempt to assuage grief.

Does this mean managers should not contact EAP when dealing with a loss in the workplace?

Absolutely not! Your EAP consultant will help you determine what the appropriate response is and how to best support your staff. **Next month: Recommendations on how to best respond to workplace grief. If you have any questions or if you are currently dealing with a workplace loss, please contact us at 1.800.647.3327.**