
How to Cope with Grief in the Workplace

By Ellen Chang | 07/07/15 - 03:01 PM EDT

NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) — In retrospect, Jason Garner wishes he had simply talked to his co-workers more about his mother, her death or even his grief instead of shutting down completely.

Garner, who was the CEO of global music for Live Nation, the Beverly Hills, Calif. concert promoter, tried to mask his pain six years ago by returning to work to manage thousands of employees and concerts. Instead, he found himself unable to cope at work and wound up resigning.

"I told [my colleagues] my mom had died, but I didn't share how it was impacting me," he said. "We go to work with the intention of giving to others -- we give our talents, hard work and advice. We don't think of work as a place to receive."

Once Garner started sharing his feelings of isolation and "being all alone" in his grief in his book, "...And I Breathed" (Amazon Digital Services, 2014), he realized that his friends and former co-workers wanted to support him. Since he didn't express his feelings, they were at odds on how to communicate with him.

"That support was there all along," he said. "It was just a matter of opening my heart to receive it."

Now a consultant for executives, Garner wishes he had taken breaks during the work day to walk or even to cry, because it would have helped him cope better.

"We think of crying at work as taboo, but with all the hours we spend in the work place, we're bound to cry at one point," he said. "So schedule time to get up from your desk and to let go. This helps prevent the unexpected breakdowns and gives you a chance to honor your feelings."

While [dealing with grief in the workplace](#) can be awkward, follow your co-worker's lead and evaluate your relationship, said April Masini, an advice columnist based in Naples, Fla.

"If you've never said 'hello,' then offering your sympathy and a shoulder to cry on is going to seem intrusive, even if you are well intentioned," she said.

If the person is someone you have worked with on a project previously, then it's thoughtful to bring up the topic and make a comment about how you understand that the person is going through a rough time, Masini said.

"That opens the door for them to let you know their comfort level and their interest in sharing," she said.

The less you say to someone can be a better approach. It can be natural to want to share your story about your mother's death or your own divorce, but "[hang back and let the person grieving be the one to set the tone](#) and the pace," Masini said.

Grief can come in various forms, including communal grief such as the loss of a job or the [death of a colleague](#). The etiquette changes when the issue is personal such as a separation, divorce or bad news about a co-worker or loved one's health.

The right way to interact with a colleague is to treat that person as you always have, said Jeanette Raymond, a Los Angeles psychologist.

"They want to feel normal, not odd or fragile," she said. "People suffering grief want to talk and share and they need to know others recognize and accept what they are going through and can empathize."

Be patient even if you feel that person is a bit short tempered or unresponsive.

"Make allowances for the trauma affecting that person, rather than take things personally if they don't accept offers of help or sympathy," Raymond said. "If they bring up the subject of their grief, engage with them, rather than getting embarrassed about what you should say."

Managers need to be flexible with work demands and deadlines, she recommends.

"Keep an eye on the grieved person and suggest adaptations according to what you notice, rather than make changes just because

someone is grieving,” Raymond said. “That comes across as an insult.”

Managers should not keep things hidden from the grieving person even if it seems like it would alleviate stress, she said. That strategy can backfire and set up the stage for mistrust and anxiety between co-workers and managers.

“The grieving person wants to be kept in the loop, asked opinions and collaborate as usual, otherwise grief will become shameful and something to hide,” Raymond said.

How to Express Sympathy

Employees should send a handwritten note to their co-worker and not just express their sympathy on social media, said Susan Stoga, a partner in Carson Stoga Communications, a social media and public relations firm in Schaumburg, Ill.

“In the workplace, a handwritten note or conversation is the appropriate human thing to do,” she said.

Sometimes conveying sincere condolences in person can also be the right course of action. After Stoga returned back to work following the death of her newborn daughter, the CFO of the large corporate company hovered around her office several times to express his condolences. The personal conversation, albeit short, was profound and one that she will never forget.

“I have always used that as my example in talking with people and dealing with grief,” she said. “You will never regret acknowledging it.”

If you learn about someone’s sorrow from social media, [do not commit a major blunder](#) by rushing up to them at the morning meeting to ask about it, Masini said. Behaving that way is invasive and impolite. Instead, give your co-worker an “opening to tell you about a death, a divorce or an illness or not,” she said.

Respect the privacy of your co-worker when he does not discuss what you’ve seen on social media or heard throughout the office. Your co-worker may not want to discuss the issue. If you decide to “like” a memorial page on Facebook, then the right thing to do is to say something to your co-worker personally as well.

“Often, it’s harder for the co-workers who want to be included in the grief than it is for the person grieving privately,” Masini said.

Oftentimes a personal connection can make a lasting impression. Susan Mead needed the support of her friends and co-workers at Johnson & Johnson seven years ago when her 20-year old son died the last night of his spring break. When some of them asked if they should attend his funeral, she responded positively.

“I personally needed to know that they cared enough to take time out of their busy work schedule to honor my son and my loss,” said Mead, who is now an ordained chaplain in Coppell, Texas.