



When a Co-Worker Completes Suicide

The death of a co-worker is often shocking and upsetting. When a co-worker completes suicide, there are often unanswerable questions and complicated emotions. People's reactions to another's suicide are varied, and can range from guilt to sorrow to anger.

This will provide you with some information to help you understand some of the reactions people go through in dealing with a co-worker's suicide. It also provides some guidance to help you help yourself and your co-workers through the process.

Why do people commit suicide?

There is no way to fully understand why a person would choose to take their own life. However, there are some explanations that may help you better understand a person's actions.

Significant depression is a characteristic of a number of medical and behavioral conditions. When depression becomes pervasive enough, some people may feel hopeless and helpless. When this happens, sometimes the person believes that suicide is the only alternative. Some conditions affect the person's ability to think rationally and to control impulses. Sometimes the loss of the rational thought, coupled with depression, can lead a person to think, "The world would be a better place without me."

Serious illness, marital, financial, or even work-related difficulties can sometimes trigger depressive reactions and irrational thinking that can develop into suicidal thoughts. This in no way means that the other parties to the person's difficulties are to blame. Suicide is a deeply personal act that is the sole responsibility of the person who took his or her own life. The person who committed suicide may or may not have even shared their thoughts and feelings with others.

Ways people react to the suicide of a co-worker

- **Guilt:** Often people develop feelings of guilt surrounding the suicide of a co-worker. These feelings are very normal and common, but are most often not truly justified.

A person's decision to complete suicide is so deeply personal that it can be beyond the reach of even the most loving and loyal friend. Even when we know or suspect that someone might be suicidal, we may not be able to stop the person from acting on the desire.

It is important to understand that loving and caring efforts do not always touch a suicidal individual. Sometimes even intensive efforts to protect someone from harming him or herself are unsuccessful.



Guilt often arises when the deceased had made either direct or veiled threats to others about their desire to commit suicide. People often do not take these threats seriously or do not see them for what they are. This does not mean that people are negligent or uncaring. Most of us aren't trained to recognize symptoms of severe depression or what's called "suicidal ideation" – thinking about suicide. Again, this is not a "fault."

- **Anger:** It is very common for people to feel angry at the person who has completed suicide. This anger may be related to personal or religious beliefs that suicide is unacceptable. The anger also may be related to the impact that the suicide has on the surviving family, friends and co-workers. Anger is often mixed with grief and can feel very confusing. With time, however, the anger will decrease as the survivors begin to understand the factors related to the suicide, such as the related depressive illness.
- **Sadness:** Intense sadness is a normal part of the grieving process for many people. This sadness, especially when mixed with guilt and anger, can seem overwhelming. It is a natural part of the process, and it should fade over time. If it doesn't, you should contact a behavioral health care professional to talk about your feelings.
- **Frustration with not knowing why:** A person's suicide often leaves many questions unanswered. It is very frustrating to not have answers that explain why someone would take their own life. However, even when survivors learn and understand factors related to the suicide, such as depressive illness, no one ever can fully answer the "why" of the suicide.

How to help a grieving co-worker

Allow the person to express his or her feelings. Grieving people need to work through their feelings and often do so by sharing their feelings with others.

- Be non-judgmental about the other person's feelings. Each person has his or her own feelings about death and suicide. It is generally not helpful to impose your own feelings at a grieving person.
- If a grieving person is expressing suicidal feelings, strongly encourage them to get immediate help.



Helping yourself

- Ask for support from your friends and family. Someone you know has died, and it is natural to feel that loss.
- Talk about your feelings with people who can be non-judgmental and supportive.
- Seek out your co-workers who are having similar feelings, as they might best understand how you feel.
- Take advantage of support services that are made available to you. Group interventions that are designed to help surviving co-workers pull together can be very helpful in understanding each other's feelings.
- Seek additional support if you feel you are having a difficult time coping after the initial shock wears off. If you are currently in treatment for depression or other psychological conditions, it is a good idea to contact your doctor or therapist if you are having trouble handling what has happened. Other supportive services include an Employee Assistance Program, your family doctor, clergy and local grief groups that can be located through your community hospital, hospice or mental health agencies.

CALL EAP 1-866-327-4762

Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

TTY users should call 1-800-424-6117

Or online at: www.eap.calhr.ca.gov

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