NIU Employee Assistance Program

Coping with Grief…Grief at Work

Grief is a normal response to any loss. Each person’s grief journey is unique, yet the process of grief is similar regardless of what was lost: a loved one, a relationship, your health or your loved one’s health, your home, your identity or role caused by changes in your family, your job, your income, and hopes and dreams. The intensity of your grief is directly related to the strength of your attachment to what was lost.

Grief in the workplace is very different today in our fast paced modern world. An employee who has lost a child or a spouse is given 3 days to grieve, and if you have a compassionate supervisor, 3 months to grieve. After 3 months, supervisors and coworkers begin to say or think, “Okay, it’s time for you to get over this and get back to normal.” The reality is that you will not be getting back to normal, your life will be different, and you have a new unwanted normal that takes a year or more to grieve and accept.

The annual “Grief Index” survey by the Grief Recovery Institute estimates that grief after the death of a loved costs U.S. businesses $37.5 billion a year. Grief caused by divorce, family crisis, and other major losses costs another $37 billion (Alan D. Wolfelt, 2005. Healing Grief at Work: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Workplace Is Touched By Loss, pg. 9). Grief in the workplace is expensive because of the reduced ability to concentrate in the weeks, months, and sometimes years after a death.

As people are in the process of grieving, there are many disconnected thoughts that race through their minds. This affects the grieving employee’s ability to concentrate and increases the opportunities for mistakes. It is typical for the grieving employee to repeatedly become overwhelmed with powerful emotions that overtake her or his ability to think clearly and logically. Particularly during the first year, the employee may be overwhelmed with grief and emotion and cannot stop crying. This is not unusual, as grief washes over the grieving person, like the waves of the ocean.

So what can a supervisor do? Alan Wolfelt believes that being compassionate and understanding not only helps the employee, it is cost effective. The overwhelming episodes of grief become further apart as time moves on. A grief-friendly work environment includes:

♦ Acknowledging the employee’s grief which makes it easier for the employee to talk about their loss and therefore, deal with the loss and pain. It also allows for coworkers and supervisors to be more empathic and understanding as grief will at times spill into the workplace.

♦ Referring your grieving employee to the Employee Assistance Program at 753-9191 to assist the employee in dealing with their grief.

♦ Educating yourself regarding Grief and Its Phases (click on for more information).

♦ Being flexible and compassionate so you do not add stress and additional challenges to the grieving person who is adapting to many unwanted changes and dealing with intense sadness.

♦ Referring the grieving employee to HRS to apply for an FMLA for the emotional grieving days and to deal with all details related to a loved one dying.