

Holidays Can Be Hard for Grieving Employees; Employers Can Offer Support

‘Grief has no timeline’

When an employee experiences the death of a loved one, their manager and colleagues often reach out—they send flowers, a condolence card, maybe attend the funeral or bring a casserole to the co-worker's house.

But once the initial shock of the loss fades, the employee likely is still grieving even after resuming their job. The holidays can be especially hard, no matter how much time has passed, because the person's presence may be missed amid the otherwise joyous festivities.

"Just because your employee returns to work doesn't mean they are ready to be fully present on the job," New York City-based company Empathy notes on its website. Empathy is a platform for supporting employees who have experienced loss. "Some employees come back to work when they are not ready, either because they feel isolated or empty at home or simply because they have exhausted their paid leave."

That can affect their work performance, making it difficult to concentrate and be productive. In fact, employers spend over \$113 billion due to reduced productivity and on-the-job errors because of mishandled grief, according to Workplace Healing's co-founders Lisa Cooper and Mindy Corporon, who shared the statistic at the SHRM Annual Conference & Expo 2023.

Supporting the Grieving Employee

The first holiday after losing a loved one may be especially difficult. However, "sometimes the second or third year of grief is noted to be even harder because people believe the mourner should be over the loss," the Mayo Clinic says on its website, "and we either forget to acknowledge the grief or judge the one still grieving. The mourner may experience more isolation and sadness."

The death of a loved one can be a major, life-changing event, said Ron Gura, Empathy CEO and co-founder.

"Grief has no timeline," Gura said. "It can catch you in the middle of the day." Someone could say something in a meeting, or a colleague shares a photo on their phone of their child, and suddenly the tears spill out, he explained.

Gura recommended the following actions for managers:

- **Be understanding.**

"First and foremost, understand this is a very sensitive topic," he said. "The employee is not going to come and tell you they can't bring their whole self back" to work yet or they're struggling with their first holiday without their spouse, parent or other loved one.

- **Provide the flexibility the employee needs to deal with the aftermath of death**—the funeral, handling probate, closing accounts, cleaning out and selling a house, and other responsibilities. It can take 18 months to wind down the affairs of someone who dies, Gura said. It's like taking on a second job.

"They're not just your account manager or sale rep. They're also the manager of an estate" he added. "It's a legal-binding, red-tape job, so allow that flexibility for [related] phone calls and meetings."

- **Talk to your employee.** Empathy suggests on its website to make the conversation part of your regular one-on-one meetings, and Gura advises managers to share their own experience. It may be as simple as the manager noting it took them some time to get their bearings after the death of a relative or close friend or ask how the employee's family is faring.

"This will open up the conversation in a very authentic way," Gura said. "You need to make the employee feel like [the workplace is] a safe place to share things."

- **Underscore your organization's benefits.** If for example you think the company's employee assistance program (EAP) would be relevant to the employee two years after a death, recommend it.

- **Don't forget about your team.** On average, a death impacts nine of the grieving employee's team members, according to Gura. A colleague may need to temporarily take on the grieving worker's responsibilities, affecting their own work. Team members also may need guidance about if and when they can reach out to an employee on bereavement leave.

"The team had a loss," Gura said, "and now we're all doing it together."

Information courtesy of [Society for Human Resource Management](#)