

# Death of a Colleague During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Understanding and Managing Grief for Healthcare Workers and Leaders

Under normal circumstances, the death of a colleague is tragic. For healthcare workers on the front lines of COVID-19, the death of a colleague may be particularly challenging. It is not only the loss of a peer and a friend, but it may also represent the loss of a fellow “fighter” in this crisis. Peers may have shared training, roles, and experiences. As a result, the death of a colleague during COVID-19 may contribute to increased fears regarding personal safety, the safety of other co-workers, and the safety of family members.

If healthcare workers do not appropriately address grief, cumulative losses can impair individual, team, and organizational effectiveness. Guidance for workers and leadership for addressing grief can facilitate emotional recovery in the workforce. Below are recommendations for healthcare workers and leaders to consider for managing grief following the death of a healthcare worker during the COVID-19 response.

### Grief and Stress Symptoms

The first step to managing grief is recognizing the symptoms, which are often very similar to stress. Intense emotions following loss are normal reactions to grief. The intensity and frequency of these emotions may be exacerbated in the context of stressful work environments. It is critical for healthcare workers to recognize these responses in themselves and their co-workers and to consider whether these responses interfere with their ability to provide effective patient care.

#### *Symptoms May Include:*

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|--|------------------------------|---|
| ○ Numbness/disbelief                       | ○ Fatigue                    | ○ Changes in eating habits                  |
| ○ Lack of concentration                    | ○ Sleep disturbances         | ○ Depression                                |
| ○ Memory lapses                            | ○ Irritability/anger         | ○ Headaches                                 |
| ○ Impaired decision-making                 | ○ Anxiety                    | ○ Work performance issues                   |
| ○ Increased alcohol or other substance use | ○ Social isolation           | ○ Guilt or shame                            |
|  | ○ Sadness                    | ○ Preoccupation with circumstances of death |
|  | ○ Inability to feel pleasure |   |

### Managing Grief Symptoms

In response to grief, some will try to push forward and may choose to work longer hours and more frequent shifts. Although this may work in the short term, it will likely contribute to burnout and loss of effectiveness in the long term. It is critical to manage the thoughts and emotions associated with grief, as well as engage in good self-care.

- Articulate or write down emotions as a way to process (e.g., journaling, voice recording, therapy).
- Be mindful of self-blame, guilt, and self-doubt; discuss these responses with others.
- Distinguish between what you can and cannot control; focus your efforts on what you can control.
- Consider ways to remember and memorialize the peer (e.g., hang a picture, pause together as a team).
- Take time to engage in regular physical activity, sleep, eating, and decompression/relaxation time.
- Use behavioral health services that are available through work and outside of work.
- To reach a trained crisis counselor through the Disaster Distress Hotline, call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.

### Expand Social Support Networks

Maintaining or building social support networks can be challenging in this COVID-19 environment, but it is also an important coping strategy for grief.

- Use technology (e.g., teleconferencing, social media) to maintain your current social networks and increase social support frequency with family and friends, which is particularly important for healthcare workers isolated from their support system.

- Create informal support groups and join formal support networks. For informal groups, create scheduled times for meeting to create consistency in communication.
- Use a buddy system. Ensure that you and your co-workers have someone to talk to regularly.
- For those for whom spirituality is important; use technology to connect with spiritual communities.
- Be kind to yourself and your colleagues as you move through grief together. Varied reactions to grief can create conflict when they are not recognized as symptoms of grief.
- Remember, it takes time to process and heal from loss of a colleague and subsequent grief. Be patient.

## **Leadership Communication**

- Considering the restrictions imposed by social distancing, find ways to remain present for staff (*e.g.*, regular and frequent staff teleconferences and video conferences).
- Speak calmly and simply. Grief and stress can make it difficult to process information.
- Use email and other communication mechanisms to provide clear and accurate information about what is known and not known.
- Acknowledge the grief and stress that healthcare workers and leaders experience in response to the loss and the conditions associated with COVID-19.
- Acknowledge the fear surrounding infection and safety that may increase following the death of a colleague. Consider that leadership may not have the same exposure risk as healthcare workers.
- Ensure that behavioral health resources such as Employee Assistance Programs are available, and that staff know how to access these services.
- Identify space and allow time for team members to engage in self-care and grieving.
- Work with the desires and needs of the families of those lost and, if appropriate and wanted, explore organizing formal or informal memorials within the healthcare setting.

## **Additional Resources**

- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress factsheet [Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel during Coronavirus and other Infectious Disease Outbreaks.](#)
- U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs webpage [Managing Healthcare Workers' Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak.](#)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention webpage [Taking Care of your Emotional Health.](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration app for electronic devices [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response App.](#)
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress factsheet [Grief Leadership During COVID-19.](#)