

## Grieving, depression affect work performance

Written by Julie Desmond  
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We almost had to let him go. Steve was forgetting everything. He forgot to check messages and forgot to return calls. He read emails and didn't respond. When asked about work that should have been completed, Steve just shrugged and gave us a deer-in-the-headlights, what-am-I-doing-here kind of stare. He was confused and the rest of the team was frustrated. A co-worker complained, "It's like the day his mother died, Steve checked out." Aha. Steve was grieving.

According to the Wall Street Journal, workplace grief costs businesses more than \$75 billion every year in reduced productivity, increased errors and accidents. After a family member dies, an employee often returns to work, eager to get back to normal life, routines, and a paycheck. However, a well-documented phase of the grieving process, depression, can interfere with performance. In this stage of grief, the reality of loss is sinking in. A survivor might experience difficulty sleeping, lack of appetite, low energy, and crying spells. The stresses of a normal day only compound the problem so that even a top employee may need some latitude and some tools in order to work through grief without letting his work go altogether.

If your organization has a bereavement policy, let the employee know about it. This is not the first benefit employees look into when starting a job, so they might not be aware. Simply knowing that he has three days off with pay can ease some of the anxiety associated with a loss. Usually, the three days are a blur, filled with planning, notifying people, and possibly traveling to a funeral. Those who have experienced losses of their own will understand, this is not a paid vacation.

When the employee returns, he or she is unlikely to be "over it." Simply saying, "I'm sorry for your loss," can really help. If your colleague sees your sympathy as an opening to free counseling sessions, it's okay to say, "Let's have lunch this week and talk about it," or, if you're not that close, "You might find some good support groups online." You don't have to be swallowed by someone else's loss, but showing that you care is appropriate. There is an elephant in the office; point it out, and move on.

Forgetfulness is common for several weeks following a major life change. It usually presents as short term memory loss; a simple conversation can be erased the minute you walk away. Avoid

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frustration by putting expectations in writing. Email summaries and scheduled reminders are useful now. You are not babysitting, although it looks like that. You are ensuring that your own priorities are met by recognizing the temporary setback your colleague might be having. Follow-up is a good habit for anyone to develop, so when this phase is over, which it will be, you can thank your grieving co-worker for inadvertently improving your work habits.

And his own. Introduce your co-worker to Post-it notes and the sticky note function on his computer, along with reminders on his phone. Seemingly simple extra steps can have a profound impact on productivity – everyone's.

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