

How to Manage Employees During a Personal Crisis

Dealing with an employee who's facing personal struggles is one of the biggest challenges you'll ever face as a boss. It's why most large corporations have well-established Employee Assistance Programs where they can send employees who need to deal with personal issues. How can you help your team member get back on track--and help your company at the same time?

Here are tips from Jennifer Winter, The Muse; Minda Zetlin, Inc.com, and Amy Gallo from HBR:

You're the Boss, Not the Friend. Your goal should be to enable my employees to address their personal issues as easily as possible while still maintaining order.

Establish a Timeline and Backups. Most people dealing with a crisis just need a little time to regroup. If it's at all possible to give your employee that time off—do. There is a limit to how much time you can reasonably allow before your group's performance and morale is impacted

Check In. Check in with your employee occasionally by dropping by his or her desk and asking how things are going or sending a quick email to check in. Demonstrate people care about each other.

Make sure you aren't part of the problem. Do an informal assessment to see how work stresses might be throwing fuel on the fire.

Don't play psychiatrist. You may be sorely tempted to act as therapist for your troubled employee. Resist that temptation. Zetlin recommends a just-the-facts-ma'am approach that focuses only on the specifics of the person's work performance such as increased absenteeism or trouble concentrating.

Be compassionate but fair. Just remember that other employees will take note of how you treat their struggling colleague and will likely expect similar consideration if they too run into hard times.

Use the resources you have. If the employee needs counseling or drug or alcohol services, you almost certainly have some resources provided by your medical insurance and/or disability carrier.

Act like yourself. Crying is a biological reaction to stress, “an emotional reset valve” (and one that is more easily triggered in women for physiological reasons). When you're faced with a weeping employee, your first instinct should be to help. The key is to engage instead of ignoring or judging the person.

Figure out what's really going on. Gently ask questions that get at the underlying issue. At the same time, respect your employees' boundaries.

Keep it simple. If you've identified that the problem is a personal one, stick to simple and comforting responses — “I'm sorry.” And resist the temptation to tell a story of your own.

Focus on work-related concerns. Try to get specific. Can you temporarily reduce her workload? Can you set up regular check-ins to monitor the situation and how it's affecting her work?

General Principles to Remember:

Do:

- Act like you would in a social situation — be comforting and solicitous
- Keep your responses simple and focused on the employee
- Make a specific plan for handling the situation going forward

Don't:

- Judge people who bring emotions to work — it's not unprofessional to cry, it's human
- Try to get your employee to stop crying — offer a tissue and let the tears flow
- Push a person to tell you what's happening if he doesn't want to talk about it

How to Support Employees through Major Grief & Loss

How you address the deaths of beloved family members is so important. “This is one of the most crucial experiences you will interact with your employees on,” Kessler says. “They will remember how you handled this. This is a moment that will be important in retention.”

Regardless of whether it’s a parent, spouse, child, cousin or close friend who dies, returning to work only three to four days after the loss can be difficult. Most people are so involved in planning the services and calling family and friends that they don’t have the time they need to process their feelings. Grief experts recommend 20 days of bereavement leave for close family members.

Often, when a co-worker returns to work after the death of a loved one, we don’t know what to say. But staying silent can make the grieving co-worker feel isolated. Here are four ways to show you care, according to David Kessler, founder of Grief.com, and Adam Grant, co-author of Option B:

1. **Show empathy.** “I’m glad you are back, and we’re here for you.” “If there is anything we can do to make your life easier, know that we are all here for you.”
2. **Acknowledge that grief is ongoing.** “How are you today?”
3. **Show up with a specific offer.** But make it clear that it’s OK if the person wants to decline.
4. **Take your cues from the griever.** “I’d love to hear more about your loved one whenever that might be convenient for you. I want to respect your privacy.”

Phrases to Avoid:

- “You’re going to be fine.”
- “You’re still young, so you can still have another child, get married again, etc.”
- “He/She is in a better place.”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “Time heals everything.”

Some individuals find work a welcome distraction from the intensity of their grief. In other cases, employees have incurred large funeral expenses, so they need to go back to work immediately to pay their bills. Keep in mind that every employee will deal with grief differently.

It’s essential that co-workers, HR and managers acknowledge that a huge loss has occurred in the employee’s life. Use these guidelines for dealing with an employee who has lost a loved one:

- Ask the employee how he or she would like you to communicate with staff.
- Be aware of when the funeral is and refrain from contacting the employee during this time.
- Send flowers and, if the funeral is local, request that one or two representatives from the office attend. Make a donation in the loved one’s memory. Have everyone sign a card.
- Encourage the employee to make use of your employee assistance program.

Keep in mind that the first year is typically the toughest, as individuals navigate all the milestones, anniversaries and birthdays without their loved one for the first time.

The more flexible an employer can be during this most difficult time, the more loyalty it will get in return over the long run.

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/3-tips-for-managing-employees-during-a-personal-crisis>

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