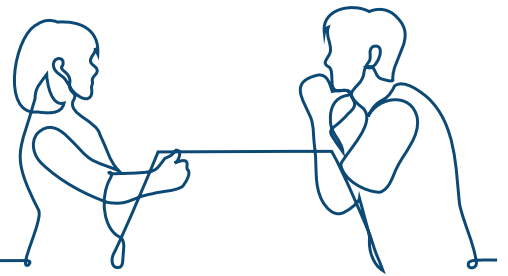


Supporting a Co-worker or Employee RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A SUICIDE OR TRAUMATIC LOSS



Suicide or other traumatic loss has a deep impact on anyone close to the person who died. Grief often includes feelings of shock as the person struggles to accept the reality of the death and its impact on their life. Many other feelings such as anger, sadness, and despair may follow. Grief can also express itself physically, behaviorally, socially, and spiritually.

Everyone's experience with grief is different and is influenced by many factors. How they cope with a loss, how deeply they feel it, and how long intense grief lasts make each person's grief journey unique. Grief cannot be confined to non-working hours and can take well over a year, or even years, to be processed. There is no timeline or time limit. Issues that often complicate suicide grief include guilt, shame, and the stigma associated with suicide, which may make it extremely difficult to talk about openly.

Even as they are processing their loss, most people have to re-enter the routines of everyday life like work and school. This may be for financial reasons or to create a break from what might be an all-consuming grief. The workplace may feel like the only part of life

that seems normal and routine. For many, going back to work can be difficult and may take time; some may even postpone their return. How someone feels about going back to work is based on many factors, including support from their employer and co-workers.

The impact of suicide or other traumatic loss in the workplace

- Immediately following a suicide or other traumatic loss, those most impacted by the death may be in a state of shock and grief. This can lead to a short-term impact on work performance.
- Unrealistic expectations of a rapid return to normal functioning from an employer are unhelpful. They create significant added stress and may result in a valued employee leaving the organization.
- Grief can be unpredictable and may appear at unexpected moments. Its impact can last far longer than a few weeks.
- With support, the employee will usually return to a normal level of functioning and productivity. Allowing time for this is important.

To talk with someone who will listen and help connect you to support: Contact griefsupport@namimaine.org or 1-800-464-5767, ext. 2317

For more information, visit NAMI Maine
After Suicide or Traumatic Loss



How can employers help?

Employers can help by offering compassion and understanding after an employee experiences a suicide or other traumatic loss. Here are some other ways to provide support at work:

- Allow the employee to return to work when they feel able to cope; explore the possibility of working part-time for a period.
- Allow the employee time away from work for counseling or other appointments.
- Ask the person how their grief is affecting them, what they want their colleagues to be told in relation to the death, and how they can best be supported. This is an opportunity to listen for, and provide, reasonable accommodations.
- Offer the employee a chance to meet with or share what support they may need with other staff they work most closely with. This can help everyone feel more comfortable when they return to work.
- Learn more about suicide, traumatic loss, grief, and mourning. Provide this information to staff and/or invite a mental health professional to speak about and build comfort in offering support.
- Provide continued support to the employee as needed. Sometimes, the details and cause of death may not be known right away and finding out these details later can cause the intense grief to resurface.



Many employers and colleagues worry about saying or doing the “right” thing when a co-worker has lost someone they love to suicide. What is most important is acknowledging the loss and being genuine in expressing care. Support at work is critical for helping a grieving person find a way toward hope and healing.

How can co-workers help?

Co-workers will react to a person’s grief and loss in different ways. The circumstances and stigma around some deaths, such as suicide, are difficult, leaving some unsure of how to approach or support the bereaved. Gaining comfort in supporting a co-worker can be challenging. Here are some tips:

- Be aware of how this loss has affected you and what your feelings and thoughts are.
- For many, the friendships and support of co-workers are an important source of support. Don’t assume the person is getting all the support they need outside of work. A workplace is a community that can help us all get through hardships and loss we face.
- Small actions can make a big difference. It can look as simple as acknowledging the death, however uncomfortable it may feel, with a few words like, *“I was so sorry to hear about your loss.”*
- Every person’s experience of loss is different. Begin a conversation by saying, *“I can’t imagine what you are going through, how can I help?”* or *“Would you like to talk about what you are going through?”*
- Use the name of the person who has died and share a memory if appropriate. It’s important to acknowledge the meaning of that person’s life, not just the manner of their death.
- A significant loss can consume a person, especially in the first weeks. Try to be patient and mindful of this.
- Be aware of and check in on special days (birthdays, wedding anniversaries, etc.) as well as the anniversary of the death, as these can bring back a flood of grief.