



What You Can Do for the Grieving Family



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Often when there is a death of an employee or a death of a family member of a co-worker, we are at a loss of what we can do to help. Whether it is a sudden death or anticipatory death due to an illness, the loss should be recognized by a gesture from the affiliated workgroup and/or the employer. Co-workers often want to offer their condolences to the grieving family and there are a variety of ways to accomplish this.

Personally acknowledging a death is one of life's more difficult challenges. Whether you have experienced a death in your personal life or in your community, the emotions are overwhelming and acknowledging your feelings to the grieving family and friends should not be forgotten. Often, we do not know what to do or how to do it, but the relationship you had with the deceased or with the grieving family will help guide what you can do to support them. The more you know about the family the easier it will be to find a way to help.

While certain gestures can be made in the early stages of grief, one area often overlooked is that of being available for the grieving family by talking about the death. We often avoid discussing the deceased,

because we assume it will upset the griever, but it actually helps in the grief process. Sharing stories helps to keep the memories alive and creates a new bond with the griever. Grievors like to talk, tell stories and have people listen to them. As hard as it is for you to listen, it is harder for the griever to deal with on a daily basis.

Regardless of the relationship, acknowledgment of the loss should be made with some type of gesture. In the early days of grief, a bereavement acknowledgement should be delivered or brought to the family. This can be in the form of food (possibly setting up a schedule with friends), a plant, flowers, personal relaxation items, bereavement literature, or a simple card with a personal note. Another wonderful gesture could be a monetary donation in memory of the deceased to an appropriate organization or a scholarship donation for the children.

The gift is a gesture of kindness, caring, and support, and it is important for the company and coworkers to show support early in the grief process.

Later, the day-to-day life of a grieving family becomes overwhelming as they are trying to find a new normalcy. The tasks are endless, emotions are frayed, and life is very different. Showing continued support for the family to either help the grieving employee return to work and become productive again or showing you care to the deceased co-worker's family can be accomplished in a variety of ways. A few suggestions would be to mow the lawn, continue to send food, help with carpooling the children to activities, assist in transportation for out-of-town guests, provide routine maintenance around the house, help with cleaning, laundry, small repair jobs, shoveling snow, gardening, car maintenance, picking up medication, etc.



Agency: Dreamstime.com

Individually these tasks might seem small and meaningless to the helpers but they are greatly appreciated by a grieving family.

Providing support for the family allows the co-workers to reduce their sense of helplessness. Different employees play different roles in the grief process, so some people will be aggressive in their support, while others will question what is needed. The reality is that a death has occurred and that cannot be changed, but caring and attention can ease the burden of grief for the surviving family.

Writing a letter about the deceased for the family is a difficult, but powerful, gesture. We must remember that an employee may spend more waking hours in the workplace than they do at home. A letter regarding personalities, quirky behaviors and personal stories can be very valuable to the grieving family over time. Often a co-worker observes different aspects of a person than those who lived with them. In years to come, when the bereaved have been able to integrate the loss, such a letter will have a special meaning and impact. When a young father passed away at work leaving a widow and a two-year-old daughter, the following letter was written by his manager to the child:

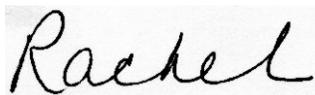
Dear Gretchen: You never knew your father very well so I thought I'd share some of my memories with you. First, he loved you and your mother very much. When he brought you to the office for a visit, you fit perfectly between his palm and his elbow. He carried you all around the office that way.

Your daddy could drive a hard bargain. I know because when I hired him he managed to get all sorts of extras when he moved. And, Gretchen, your father loved roller coasters! One day we played hooky from work, and he rode every roller coaster at the amusement park - some of them twice! And even one where he had to stand up and was turned upside down! It made him laugh. In fact, he did a lot of laughing and smiling, but no smile was bigger than the one he wore each time he talked about you.

*Sometimes it may not feel very good, but you are very lucky that Rod was your father, and I am very lucky to have known him.
Love, Terri.*

While the letter had little meaning to the two-year-old at the time, it was well received by the widow. The feeling that someone cared enough to take the time to write a beautiful letter made a huge impact. As she grows up, the little girl will cherish it forever.

Letters are a great way of showing respect for the deceased and for the surviving family. There are many ways of acknowledging the loss which shows the family how much you care. This will help them through the difficult days—no gesture is too small and will go a long way in helping the grieving family find normalcy again.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rachel". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

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