

Dealing With the Sudden Death of a Popular Co-Worker
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Tim Russet's sudden death shocked the nation. The popular moderate of *Meet the Press* was a familiar face to many who watched his show.

By all accounts, Tim was a hard-working journalist, caring co-worker, and dedicated family man. His colleagues report feelings of shock and grief at his death, and describe the empty space he will leave behind--not just on his show--but in the morale of his workplace. His death has taken some of the "heart" out of his company.

Tim's colleagues are not alone in their feelings. Two weeks ago, I did corporate grief counseling for four different companies, all who'd suddenly lost a popular employee. Many other businesses have lost valued employees and struggled to cope with the aftermath of the deaths.

Last week I was interviewed by Sarah Needleman, a Wall Street Journal reporter, for her article on how companies cope with the death of an employee. She wanted my perspective on what people go through in that circumstance, and how people can cope. Afterward, in thinking about our conversation, I realized the topic might make a good newsletter.

(See: http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB121373514560782031-1MyQjAxMDI4MTEzOTcxMzk1Wj.html)

Why does the sudden death of a co-worker hit so hard? First of all, most people spend more time at work than they do with their families. Co-workers can form a caring community. It's not uncommon for a grieving employee to say, "We lost a member of our family." Some employees can work together for years, sharing the ups and downs of life--births, deaths, struggles, joys. Perhaps they've formed close personal friendships.

Sometimes having a co-worker die might be the first time a company has lost someone abruptly, or at least lost someone who hadn't been ill and frequently absent, or on leave, or retired. People aren't used to coping with the loss of a colleague.

The initial news about the death is usually met with shock and disbelief. People find it difficult to reconcile their last memories of the person, who was alive hours or days ago, with the idea that he or she is dead.

If the person died of natural causes, co-workers think back to all the times in the last weeks that they saw or interacted with the deceased. They search their memory for clues from the person's demeanor, face, words, and body to see if there were any signs that something was wrong. Many times they might remember seeing something such as tiredness or paleness, or

hearing the person say he wasn't feeling well. Other times, there was no sign that deceased was unwell.

On the job site, the memory of the deceased is all around. Walking past the office or workstation can be painful. I describe this as getting "slapped" with reminders. An employee might forget the situation for a while, becoming absorbed in her work. But then she walks past the office, reads an old email from the deceased, sees someone else who has been crying, or has a sudden impulse to talk to him, and the realization of the loss again sweeps over her.

Another point of grief is what I call *rituals* employees might have with the deceased. Perhaps he went out of his way to greet everyone in the morning. Maybe they tended to share a cup of coffee at break time. Perhaps they regularly went to lunch together. Maybe every time you walked past her desk you swiped candy out of her bowl. Perhaps he was the friend you regularly debated your favorite sporting teams with. Every time in the day or week the ritual would usually occur brings back the sadness.

Employees will experience their reactions differently, and it's important not to judge yourself for your feelings or to judge others. You might think that the people closest to the deceased have the strongest response, and usually that's the case. But not always. Some people will feel numb and might not show any emotion. Others will be overcome with grief.

There are other factors that come into play around the grief response.

1. **An individual's personality.** Some people are more sensitive and emotional than others.
2. **Other deaths in the present.** Those who've suffered the loss of friends or family members in the last few years might re-experience their pain.
3. **Other deaths in the past.** Those who lost an important family member as a child or adolescent have a "wound" from that death. At times like these, the wound can be reopened, especially as he or she thinks about what the family is going through.
4. **If the deceased has young or adolescent children.** Many times co-workers might not be that close to the deceased, but they are VERY upset about what the spouse and children are going through. The spouse has unexpectedly become a single parent and the children have lost their father or mother. Their lives will never be the same.
5. **Prior life experience.** A person might feel more hardened to death from experiences such as serving in the military where they saw combat.
6. **If the deceased was relatively young.** There is a feeling of unfairness that he or she wasn't able to live a "full" life.
7. **If the deceased was killed.** As sad as it is when someone dies of a heart attack or cancer, there's a feeling that it was the person's

time to go because his or her body gave out. When someone dies in an accident or is murdered, there is a feeling of unfairness or outrage because he or she was taken before his or her time.

8. **The depth of the person's religious belief.** Many times people are able to find solace because they believe the deceased is in a better place.

Guilt

In addition to sadness, grief, and loss, guilt is a common reaction. The feeling of guilt can stem from several causes.

1. **The belief (however irrational) that the co-worker could have done something to prevent the death.** This is especially difficult if the employee died on the job site. People feel they could have been with her or given CPR and prevented the death. But co-workers can also feel guilt if the person died away from the site. "If only I'd told him to go to the doctor when I saw/heard he wasn't feeling/looking well," is a frequent comment.
2. **The fear that a heavy workload or job stress contributed to the person's death.** When co-workers know the deceased was buried with work or problems on the job, they can't help but wonder if the person would still be alive if they hadn't been so busy and stressed.
3. **Neglect of opportunities to get together outside of work or not having a chance to say goodbye.** Many times I hear stories about how an employee had made vague plans with the deceased to get together "someday." The comment usually is something like, "We were both busy, and I thought we'd have plenty of time to do it."
4. **One of the last interactions with the deceased was negative.** Perhaps the two employees had an adversarial relationship. Or maybe it was a one-time butting of heads or one person snapping at the other. But it's too late to apologize, smooth things over, or strive for a better relationship.
5. **Resentment that now co-workers will have to take on some or all of the deceased's duties, when they already have a full workload.** The co-workers feel guilty about feeling resentful.
6. **Sadness that the co-worker didn't take the time to get to know the person better.** Many times when co-workers share stories about the deceased, interesting facts about her life or personality come to light. People will talk about how much she cared about people, or how she'd jump in to help. They smile through their tears sharing how she made them laugh. In hearing

positive qualities about someone, regret arises for not knowing this about her before she died.

7. **Guilt on the part of management that they put too much pressure on the deceased or failed to ease his workload.**

Most managers know when someone is working too hard. But there is either no choice because *everyone* has to work that hard, or it's a personal choice on the part of that employee. Many times managers encourage someone to overwork, and they don't try to slow them down.

But the manager may have said something to the employee about taking a vacation or working fewer hours, which the employee ignored, and the manager wishes he had been more forceful.

8. **Guilt about lack of cross training.** The employee might have had knowledge or skills that no one else in the company possesses. Now there is a hole in the knowledge or workload that can't be easily filled by someone else in the company.

Anger

Anger is another common reaction. It can stem from several causes.

1. **Anger because the deceased didn't take better care of themselves.** Perhaps she was overweight, smoked, or didn't see the doctor. Maybe she worked too hard. All these can make co-workers feel upset with the deceased.
2. **Anger at God for taking this person.** It's not uncommon to feel it's not fair for this *good* person to die, especially since there are so many bad people left alive. There is mourning and anger that the deceased still had so much to contribute to the world, and now he won't be able to.
3. **Anger that the person was careless enough to cause an accident that killed him.** People may feel the accident was preventable and blame the deceased for his part in his death.
4. **Anger with the person who caused the accident or killed the person.** It's common for colleagues to be angry with the person(s) who caused the death, especially if they believe the culprit will go unpunished.
5. **Anger with management or family members who caused stress to the deceased.** They wonder if there hadn't been so much stress or pressure in her life, she'd still be alive.
6. **Anger that now a project at work will be delayed.** In addition to the increased workload and loss of morale, the company might suffer financially by not meeting project goals. Co-workers or management

might also lose promotion opportunities, bonuses, or kudos because of the delay.

Trouble With Focus and Concentration

Regardless of what emotions people feel, most will have problems with focus and concentration. Although some individuals become so involved with work in order *not* to feel their grief.

Most people will have some of both. They'll be able to work for a while, then something will remind them of the loss, and they'll lose concentration. Also, employees might find it takes more time to finish tasks or projects. They also may be prone to making mistakes.

I tell people to be kind to themselves and lighten their expectations of themselves and others. Most people will not be doing their normal work output for the first few days after the death. I tell people to take a break if they become teary. Perhaps they will need to share their feelings with a co-worker. Or they might need to be alone and take a walk around outside the building. Also, ask others to double-check important work for mistakes.

It's also important to remember that stress and grief may cause some people to be quiet, which may seem uncaring. Irritability, especially in men, is another sign of, of stress, grief, or depression. Try not to take any of your co-worker's words or behaviors seriously.

Taking Care of Yourself

Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions are coming up for you.

Recognize that you'll be moving in and out of different feelings, and your ability to focus will waver.

Don't be hard on yourself.

Take breaks as needed.

Spend quality time with those you love.

Spend time doing activities that replenish your energy and make you feel good.

Go easy on the alcohol. It's one thing to gather together with co-workers at a bar after work to share and mourn together. But don't use drugs or alcohol to suppress your feelings or help you cope.

Get enough sleep.

Exercise and eat well.

Don't overindulge with food. Allow yourself some comfort food, but don't eat too much or go for too many days with eating to suppress your feelings.

Don't skip meals. If you don't feel hungry, have something light, such as a protein drink, soup, or a yogurt.

Supporting Co-workers

Let them know you care.
Don't take things personally.
Be sensitive about how *you* react to others.
Band together to have a memorial or other good-bye ritual.
Attend the funeral.
Let them know you are open to sharing about feelings.
Give hugs, but get permission from the individual first.
Contribute to a scholarship or hardship fund for the family.
Offer your help if you know a colleague is overwhelmed by their feelings and workload.

Making Life Changes

For most people, the sudden death of someone they know causes them to think about their life. We tend to believe we have lots of time to accomplish things or be there for our families, but a sudden death reminds us that life can change (for the better or for the worse) in a moment.

Take the time to rethink your life and write down a list. What are your goals and dreams? Are you taking care of yourself physically and emotionally? Do you get regular medical and dental checkups? Are your affairs in order?

Then, both to honor the memory of your colleague, and to take care of yourself, take the steps in order to accomplish what's on your list. Start with baby steps ... establishing a bank account and saving for that dream vacation ... sign up for one college class ... call your doctor to set up an appointment ... make an appointment with a lawyer ... go for a walk after work.

But don't wait for someone to die before you take time to review your life. In this next week, examine your life, make your list, and take your first step toward accomplishing your goal.