



HOW COWORKERS CAN SUPPORT THE GRIEVING PARENTS

Pregnancy and infant loss are profound and painful experiences. Bereaved parents commonly feel overwhelming and complicated grief feelings over the short and long term, including shock, sadness, anger, anxiety, confusion, guilt, and self-blame. These feelings are natural and normal. Sadly, because pregnancy and infant loss are not widely discussed or understood in our society, the grief and needs of parents bereaved in this way can sometimes go unrecognized, leaving grievers feeling invisible and misunderstood.

WE KNOW THAT THE VALUE OF A LIFE IS BASED ON THE LOVE AND CONNECTION FELT WITH THAT CHILD - INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE WOMB, AT ANY GESTATION OR AGE. The dreams and hopes for that child's presence and future, and the new identity people begin to take on as they parent a baby in the womb, or prepare to parent the baby when it is born, are lost when a pregnancy ends or a baby dies. In seeking to offer care and support to grieving parents, it is essential that we offer an open space for their story and validate what it means to them. In that way, we can then offer support for their feelings and ways of expressing those feelings. Each grieving person is unique in the way they carry and express their grief, and most grievers need compassion and encouragement over time from friends for the unfolding of their own grief process.

As a coworker, you may also be grieving this loss and experiencing a host of difficult feelings, both around the loss of the baby and the pain of your friend(s). Your grief is also important and finding ways to care for yourself and express your grief feelings is key, to allow you to have the emotional resources to also be a support to the grieving parent(s). Depending on the circumstances for you and your grieving coworker, you may benefit from seeking your own support. Some bereaved parents benefit from openly sharing their grief feelings and exchanging active support with those around them during this difficult time, while others need space and privacy to mourn without feeling influenced or responsible for the feelings of others. In particular, it is helpful to avoid situations that lead grieving parents to feel that they also need to manage the grief or discomfort of others around them.



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Following a pregnancy or infant loss, a grieving parent may choose to take an extended leave from work or may choose to return to work, depending on their eligibility, financial situation and personal preferences. During any period of absence, there are many ways that coworkers can be in touch to express their condolences and care. When the bereaved parent returns to work, continuing to acknowledge their loss is important. Because the meaning of this kind of event and the needs and wishes of grieving parents may not initially be clear for coworkers, many people can feel uncomfortable or unsure what to say. While there are no guidelines that will fit for all individuals' needs, the following guidance will be helpful for many grieving parents:

- 1. DO acknowledge the loss with kindness.** Many people will defer to saying nothing, afraid of upsetting the grieving individual or “reminding them” of their sadness. Be assured that you are not reminding them of something they have put out of mind; their grief is present, and most people appreciate having their experience and difficulty acknowledged with expressions of care and concern. Offer support that is genuine and reflects your true capacities and interests; for many families, it may be helpful for offers of help to be specific, or to provide some choices (i.e. food, childcare, a shoulder to lean on, distraction and laughter) and for them to be offered in a way that makes it easy for the parents to decline if that feels best for them. Even if they don't wish to take you up on your offer, they will appreciate the kindness in it.
- 2. DON'T expect their grief to look a certain way.** There is no right or wrong way to feel in the aftermath of this kind of event and each grieving person will find their own way of navigating their needs for expression and privacy, togetherness and solitude. The flows of different intense emotions may be consistent or unpredictable, steady or stormy, and grieving parent(s) are often working hard to manage their own inner and outer experience. Listen carefully and take your lead from the grieving parent(s), showing up and showing care that creates safety for sharing if the parent(s) wish, and when they are ready.

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- 3. DON'T make it about yourself.** Pregnancy and infant loss are sadly common experiences, but this doesn't make the experience the same for all who go through it. While the disclosure of a loss of your own may make the bereaved parent feel less alone, don't assume their feelings are similar to yours, and don't share your story or advice based on your own experience unless invited. Focus your care and attention on their experience and be open and accepting of the many ways that they may be thinking and feeling about this death. Likewise, many individuals offer platitudes, such as "It's probably for the best," or "You can have another child," out of their own discomfort and a wish to ease the suffering of a bereaved parent, but often these comments can feel minimizing, dismissing or misattuned, even when the intention is to soothe. Grievors do not need additional pressure to be cheerful and look on the bright side of their experience; they need encouragement and support to be with their own experience fully and authentically, both the pain and any gifts that may arise over time.
- 4. UNDERSTAND that the loss of this child may have many layers.** Whether the child was a sibling or first child, whether fertility struggles were part of conception, whether this was a wanted pregnancy, whether there were prior pregnancy or infant losses for this family, whether there were external factors related to parental health or medical care involved in the pregnancy or infant loss, all of these factors can complicate and compound the grief parents feel. Many parents can blame themselves and feel like it's their fault and such a loss can bring back previous losses or traumas. It's also normal for a grieving family to question their beliefs, faith and life purpose. Listening patiently, over time, and balancing realistic reassurance with understanding for the complex feelings and meanings bereaved parents are struggling through, is a significant contribution.
- 5. KNOW that grief cannot be "fixed," that this loss will last forever and that the grief needs of the parents will change over time.** The feelings and meaning of an event of this magnitude may change with time as the grieving parent processes the many losses inherent in the death of their child. Grief does not pass quickly, but can morph over time, and hopefully becomes manageable. Deep grief can last months or years, depending on the bereaved individual. Care and presence over the long term is invaluable, as many people mean well, but forget and move on within a few months following a death. Grieving parents will appreciate the remembrance of special days and anniversaries such as birth and death anniversaries, or a due date in the case of pregnancy loss. Know that Mother's and Father's Days and other triggers around the loss may be difficult. Offer small gestures of kindness. Use the baby's name, if one was given. Sit in silence. Ask how they are feeling. Listen. Continue to show up. Check in regularly. Validate and normalize their feelings and thoughts.

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6. KNOW that grieving parents may need their workplace to be a place of safety. For many people following a major loss, their grief is so intense that they may want or need spaces where it is not front and centre, where they can perform the way they did before this loss. Others may need their grief to be acknowledged and openly held in their work environment. Grief naturally challenges a person's focus, concentration, memory, identity and sense of stability, and bereaved individuals may not be able to perform work duties at the same level that they did before this major event in their lives. Compassion, respect, accommodation and support are key as they reorient their lives and tend to other priorities. Take your cues from the bereaved parent, acknowledging their loss and then finding out from them whether they wish to discuss it or not, or whether they would like you to check in about it or not. You can let them know, for example, that you wish to be a support and are willing to talk about it with them, but that if they would prefer you not inquire unless they mention it, you are happy to support them in this way. You can discuss their workload, offering if appropriate to redistribute or assist in covering certain tasks. This can be done in collaboration with management to ensure adequate cooperation and coverage during their period of recovery. Knowing that you care, are emotionally and practically available, and will follow their lead, provides helpful information for them to care for their needs in a dignified way that feels best for them. Bereaved individuals rarely forget those who “showed up” for them in their time of sorrow.

GRIEF IS NOT AN ILLNESS. Although the intense pain of the loss is unpredictable and can last years, with caring support, bereaved parents usually find that the loss eventually becomes an experience they can carry with them, and that while they may be changed forever, they can still find joy and pleasure and engage fully in work and life.

