

## Supporting Survivors in the Workplace

### What Workplaces Can Do in the Aftermath of a Suicide to Support Survivors of Suicide Loss

Those bereaved by suicide often suffer in silence. Because people in general frequently feel uncomfortable when confronted with the idea of death, living through the aftermath of suicide only increases the magnitude of those feelings. Helping a coworker move beyond such a tragedy could be the most important thing you'll ever do. By taking action, you can help lessen the isolation survivors experience and assist them in healing.

#### Things to consider when helping survivors of suicide loss:

- Participate in mourning rituals (e.g., funerals, memorial services, etc.).
- If appropriate, help create a memory album or quilt for survivors or the surviving family
- Bring easy-to-heat up and nutritious frozen meals to grieving family (e.g., a big batch of chicken soup is especially comforting).
- If the deceased was a coworker, offer the family assistance by packing up the personal belongings of the individual's desk or office, and deliver the contents to an appropriate location. If you deliver the items to the person's former home, call ahead to see if a friend or someone from the family will be there will be available and at the location when you deliver the items.
- Ask the survivor or survivors of the deceased what you can do to help, and then follow through. During the acute aftermath phase, you can help them in many concrete ways:
  - Keep a list of phone calls from those expressing their condolences, visitors, and people who bring food and gifts
  - Help keep the mail straight—assist with the sorting of bills, cards, newspaper notices
  - Offer to make calls to people the survivors wish to notify
  - Help with errands—walk the dog, shop for food
- Offer to help with documentation—for insurance, newspapers, and memorial services
- Share fond memories of the individual by writing down a story or creating a collage of photos
- The emotional intensity of the grief is great. Survivors may need to talk, cry, scream, or sit silently for hours at a time. Repetition is part of healing.
- Listening with your heart and without judgment is most helpful. You don't need to take away the pain (and most likely you wouldn't be able to do that anyway). Your presence alone is enough to help the survivor know that he or she is not alone.
- Use the deceased's name and ask for and tell stories—hearing the name and remembering facts and stories about the individual can be comforting to the survivor.
- Give the survivor or survivors permission to grieve.
- Clichés such as “Everything has a reason” and “Time heals all wounds” are not helpful at this time.
- Be patient: grief takes its own course and can last for a long time. Support is often most needed after the initial chaos of the trauma has diminished.
- Be mindful of holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. Such occasions can serve as particularly painful reminders.
- Offer to help find support groups or other resources such as books and pastoral care. The American Association of Suicidology has a Survivors of Suicide Kit complete with literature and a directory of suicide support groups ([www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)).
- Because everyone experiences traumatic events such as a suicide in different ways, you would do well to avoid making statements such as, “I know how you feel.”
- Don't worry about saying the wrong things. Simply concentrate on what is being shared with you. Think of yourself as someone who is walking with the survivor, offering support as someone who shares his or her grief.