



# GRIEF AND LOSS IN THE WORKPLACE

## HOW TO MANAGE AND SUPERVISE WITH COMPASSION

Grief and loss can occur at work and home, and are significant events in people's lives. The loss of a loved one, a co-worker, tragic world events, or significant changes in the workplace can bring about strong emotions and experiences of grief. At such times, people look to their leaders for hope, compassion, and direction on how to proceed. Leaders have a unique opportunity to create a workplace culture that is accepting and honoring of people's emotions, particularly in times of loss and difficulty. When we draw from our values, resources, and networks as avenues to create compassion, we live into U-M's commitment to being a community of support.

### GUIDELINES FOR MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

#### Leading in Times of Loss

Managers and supervisors must often balance the needs for work responsibilities being met and taking the time to ensure that staff and faculty feel supported and valued. These guidelines can assist teams impacted by personal and/or workplace losses, accidents, serious or lengthy illness, and many other types of grief responses.

**Acknowledge your own grief and learn about the services available to you and your team (e.g., group support, individual counseling and consultation, materials on grief). The counseling teams can also support you as you process this loss.**

#### COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE LOSS

Sharing news about a loss is not easy, but there are resources to support you. Communicate about the loss in a sensitive but direct way. Before sharing information about the loss, make sure you understand what you can share and what

is confidential. Always respect the confidential nature of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others. If the loss is about an employee, you can receive additional guidance about communicating information from your HR partner or the [Faculty and Staff Counseling and Consultation Office \(FASCCO\)](#) for campus faculty and staff. Michigan Medicine faculty and staff, contact the [Office for Counseling and Workplace Resilience \(OCWR\)](#).

- Feeling awkward or not knowing what to say to a grieving person is understandable. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge their grief and loss openly. A simple statement of care can be meaningful.
- Set an example for open communication by establishing contact with your team and the person(s) grieving.
- In both words and actions, you can convey that what has happened is a significant event, and simultaneously express a belief that together the team will find a way through it.

- Ensure your team knows the facts if the loss is made public; for example, what happened, any funerals or memorials that are planned, and resources to help support during difficult times. This is a good time to address any uncertainties or questions.
- If the loss is a relative of one of your staff or faculty members, ask them what details they want shared with their colleagues. In doing so, you allow them a sense of control in a time of uncertainty and demonstrate your respect by honoring their wishes. Ask how you might support them. For example: Would phone calls be okay? Would they prefer written notes or text messages? Invite them to contact you with updates and needs for assistance if that would be useful to them.

## SUPPORTING YOUR TEAM

- Recognize that experiencing a wide range of emotions is a normal reaction to a loss. When you emphasize that a range of emotions is expected, it allows people more freedom to understand and express their emotions, instead of expending their energy avoiding or trying to minimize them.
- Create outlets for people's natural wishes to help and support each other. Provide a safe place where members of your workplace community can gather to comfort each other, create meaning, and find out the details of what happened. If appropriate, your team may choose to participate in expressions of their grief to families and loved ones (e.g., flowers, cards, meals, practical help to the family).
- Encourage your team to discuss how they can support each other and what they would like to do to honor the person who has died. Would they like to have a memorial service? Would they like to put together a scrapbook of memories to honor their lost colleague's work life? If the loss is a relative of a colleague, the team might want you to take the lead in finding out how they can be most helpful.
- If the grief impacts many team members and disrupts normal operations, plan for coverage or back-up services. Your HR partner can consult with you on planning for maintenance of your unit operations or services.
- Acknowledge the strain on colleagues who shoulder additional workloads while coping with their own feelings. Let them know that you are concerned for them, too.
- There may be unexpected and upsetting situations in which the event produces even more shock, disbelief, and questions such as "what" and "why" it happened. Unanticipated deaths, particularly death by suicide, may require additional support.
- Bring in assistance for meeting and talking with your team. Counselors from FASCCO and OCWR can be helpful for consultation and facilitation of group meetings.

## FOLLOWING UP

- If you have a staff or faculty member who takes time off as a result of a loss, check in with them when they return to work to see how they are doing and to inquire how you might assist them.
- Recognize that work routines can be supportive. It may also be appropriate to lighten a team member's workload for a time. Check in regularly with them on their progress by providing structure, flexibility, and support.
- Use your routine meetings to check in with your team to inquire how they are doing. In asking the question, you are demonstrating that you understand that incorporating the meaning of grief into their lives takes time and effort.
- Be patient, compassionate, optimistic, and available to listen. Do more listening than talking. Expect that those who are grieving will need to talk about the loss many times, especially during holidays and anniversaries which are extra difficult.
- Periodic tears and low spirits are common. Ask about specific things you might do to help: do they want any information shared with others, or do they need help with their work? It's a time that demands flexibility.
- Don't expect individuals to "snap out of it" or expect their grief will go away quickly. Rather, create an accepting environment where grieving is seen as a process that takes time and is normal, yet work can progress.
- When a specific individual is not coping well, shows signs of worsening mood, or their grieving response is beyond the range of emotions seen in others, seek consultation from FASCCO or OCWR for additional guidance. For the entire team, offering reminders about the availability of counseling support can be helpful for normalizing professional support through the grieving process.

## OTHER KINDS OF LOSS

### In the Case of Serious Illness

- A staff or faculty member experiencing a serious illness or injury may have brief periods of work absences or hospitalization to stabilize their condition.
- Respect privacy, but invite your team member to talk about their workplace needs for assistance or flexibility as appropriate and as they feel comfortable.
- Everyone benefits from having an individual maintain self-esteem, identity, and integrity to work as long as possible.
- Discuss realistic plans for the return to work. Contact Work Connections or the OCWR or FASCCO team for assistance with return-to-work plans.

### If the Losses and Accompanying Feelings Are Associated with Job Reorganization or Downsizing

- Allow for reflection on and valuing of the past. The team may find it helpful to review their history and accomplishments.
- Point out what aspects of work will remain unchanged. Will there be some “business as usual?” Connect to the values of your team and the mission of the work as possible foundations for stability and consistency.
- Acknowledge that the team members who retained their jobs may feel a sense of loss, anxiety, guilt, anger, or many other emotions. Support your team through frequent check-ins and honoring their responses to workplace changes.
- Balancing both realistic hope and acknowledgement of changes, you can guide efforts and energy to the new realities of your work. Help forge new relationships and a renewed definition of tasks and commitment. Emphasize that there may also be gains, such as new opportunities and responsibilities as needed. Invite the team to contribute their ideas to this new shared future.

## GRIEF AND LOSS - UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

FASCCO supports campus faculty and staff. [OCWR](#) supports Michigan Medicine faculty and staff. These mental health teams offer confidential services at no cost, including:

- Group support through grief, loss, and other impactful events
- Individual counseling
- Consultation with leaders, managers, and supervisors on mental health topics
- Assessment and referral information for support services

## RELATED UNIVERSITY POLICIES

In the case of death in the immediate family, the University provides up to three days paid time off work to attend the funeral or interment and make necessary arrangements ([SPG 201.03](#)).

## SPECIALTY GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS AND SERVICES

For a current list of available community resources, contact FASCCO or OCWR. Some examples of specialty grief support include:

- Bereaved children, adolescents, or young adults
- Caregiver support
- Parents grieving the loss of a child
- Hospice information
- Major illness and physical loss support
- Widows and widowers support
- Support for separated and divorced individuals

## QUESTIONS

For counseling and other resources to help faculty, staff, and supervisors, contact the university's mental health teams for confidential, short-term counseling, consultation, information, and referrals.

Campus faculty and staff, contact the Faculty and Staff Counseling and Consultation Office (FASCCO). Call (734) 936-8660 or email [fascoco@umich.edu](mailto:fascoco@umich.edu).

Michigan Medicine faculty and staff, contact the Office of Counseling and Workplace Resilience (OCWR). Call 734-763-5409 or email [counseling@med.umich.edu](mailto:counseling@med.umich.edu).