

SIEC Alert # 44, April 2001

## *Bereavement In The Workplace*

Regardless of whether or not a workplace is prepared for helping bereaved employees, grief is an issue workers will either experience on the job or bring to the job due to:

- The illness or death of a colleague.
- The death or illness of a family member or friend.
- Losses associated with downsizing or reorganization.

Responses to grief may include "mental lapses, decreased energy, difficulty in making decisions, anxiety, helplessness, an inability to concentrate and preoccupation" (Eyetsmitan 1998: 469). Other reactions may involve social withdrawal, crying or other seemingly inappropriate workplace behaviour (Eyetsmitan: 469).

Employers often underestimate the effect of an illness or death on workers around the bereaved person. Employers may not understand or recognize:

- The extent to which employees form emotional attachments with one another. In some cases, friendships with co-workers can be more important than familial relationships.
- Problems associated with grief, e.g. absenteeism or personal conflict may surface months after the loss.
- The grief process.

### **Strategies for Helping Bereaved Workers**

A 1994 study indicated illness or a death in the family are the second most common problems which affect workplace performance (Naierman 1996: 20). The costs of employee grief can be quite significant especially if the response from an employer is inappropriate or inadequate. Employers can do many things to help bereaved staff including:

- Offering concrete and specific help. Often, the newly bereaved are too overwhelmed to know what they need (Naierman: 21). They may require information on bereavement leave, benefit entitlements (Morell, p. 2), and paperwork associated with final pay cheques, medical claims or life insurance policies (Kodanaz, p. 3-4).
- Being flexible about time-off especially in the first year after bereavement. Some employees will require more leave than the company bereavement policy allows.
- Redistributing those parts of the bereaved employee's job which must be done. Eliminating the pressure to perform is one way of demonstrating support for a grieving employee (Kodanaz, p.1-2). At the same time, the employer must be aware of the additional strain this can create for other staff that temporarily or permanently take on new duties.
- Recognizing some employees may return to work too quickly to avoid dealing with their grief (Eyetsmitan: 472). In the long-term, this method of coping is counterproductive as it can lead to complicated grief reactions.

### **The Conflict Between Personal Reactions to Grief and Professional Expectations**

There is an expectation that workers will continue to act in an appropriately professional manner even if they have been bereaved.

Rowling (1995) explored this duality of personal and professional roles among a sample of Australian teachers. Teachers have a professional belief in the need to control their emotions, to be in control of a situation, and to provide leadership (Rowling 321).

However, this demand for professionalism is counteracted by personal responses to grief.

This conflict is not unique to teachers but may also be seen among workers in other helping professions, e.g. police officers, health care workers or clergy.

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## SIEC Resources\*

SIEC#000232

Barski-Carrow, B. (2000). Using study circles in the workplace as an educational method of facilitating readjustment after a traumatic life experience. *Death Studies*, 24(5), 421-439.

SIEC#930663

Berman, A. L., Jacobs, D., & Jobes, D. A. (1993). Case consultation: Suicide in the workplace. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 23(3), 268-272.

SIEC#980984

Davis, M. M. (1990). Coping with a co-worker's suicide. *Personnel Journal*, 69(6), 40, 43, 45, 47.

SIEC # 980528

Eyetseman, F. (1998). Stifled grief in the workplace. *Death Studies*, 22(5), 469-479.

SIEC#930907

Krysinski, P. R. (1993). Coping with suicide: Beyond the five-day bereavement leave policy. *Death Studies*, 17(2), 173-177.

SIEC#940637

Laing, M. K. (1994, August). Letting the healing begin. *American Journal of Nursing*, 49-50.

SIEC#931163

Mericle, B. P. (1993). When a colleague commits suicide [interview]. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, 31(9), 11-13.

SIEC#950308

Rowling, L. (1995). The disenfranchised grief of teachers. *Omega*, 31(4), 317-329.

## Web-Based Resources

Kodanaz, R. B. Grief in the Workplace. Retrieved June 10, 2004, from <http://www.bereavementmag.com/catalog/booklets/workplace.asp>

Naierman, N. The Grieving Employee. Retrieved June 10, 2004, from <http://www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/articles/employee.pdf>

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