Information Resource Sheet No.11

MODEL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR
GRIEF AND LOSS AT WORK

Introduction to guidelines

Awareness of risk: an emerging challenge for OHS managers
When a staff member dies, the death may cause grief and loss responses amongst the workforce. There may be a similar response when a family member of a staff person dies. Grief is a normal response to death and dying. Grief is also a recognised cause of stress, which can influence employees thinking, their capacity to function, their interactions with others, and bring on physical symptoms.

The purpose of these guidelines
These guidelines are to help employers recognise grief reactions in themselves and their staff, and to assist employers provide effective support either when a member of staff dies, or a family member of a staff person dies.

The guidelines aim to ensure a safe and healthy work environment for staff to understand their experience, accept the changed situation at work brought about by the death, and integrate their experience of grieving and responding to loss into their working lives.

What is grief?

Feelings of grief are different for everyone. Grieving staff may feel sad for the loss of the person who died from their lives, feel relief at the end of suffering, or re-experience the grief of their own past losses. Some may experience heightened emotions, including anger, helplessness and fear, and over-sensitivity to current problems and concerns. Unresolved grief and prolonged feelings of helplessness can cause stress and lead to the onset of depression.

Grief may cause emotional distress, disturbed or confused thought patterns, physical symptoms and behavioural changes. These grief reactions at work may cause the workplace to be less safe and healthy for employees.

Occupational health and safety planning for managing grief at work

Managing the managers' grief
Everyone who works for you may be affected in some way by the death of a staff member or the death in a staff person's family. In cases where the employer or management is personally affected, it may be appropriate to bring in a grief consultant to guide or lead the planning process.

Identifying the needs
Identify your staff's needs. (See below: 'Assessment of risk factors for grief')

Identify constraints and opportunities
Identify your current constraints and opportunities.

- Do you have a budget for training, access to support/counselling services, providing activities to build peer support?
- Will managing this grief impinge on existing policies? How?
- Identify existing strengths and weaknesses amongst your organisation's existing programs and staff for dealing with loss and grief.
- Are there resources you can access which may help you? (See 'Support organisations').

Develop and adopt an OHS policy
Develop a workable policy for your organisation on managing loss and grief.

Develop and adopt a management plan
Develop a plan for the effective management of loss and grief for your organisation, based on your needs and resources, inclusive consultation with your workforce, and clear advice on when and how the plan with be used. Your plan needs to ensure you:

- Provide a supportive work environment, including peer support, debriefing meetings, access to counselling, and mentor support for managers dealing with grief issues on an ongoing basis.
- Provide appropriate training and information that allows staff to explore death and loss issues, and learn skills for dealing with death, loss and grief.
- Plan for the death of a staff member if an illness becomes terminal, including identifying the wishes of the staff person, their family, and staff.
- Consider the needs of special groups, such as the ill person's supervisor, work group, clients.
- Consider whether there are cultural/religious issues for any people, and how to manage them. When possible, these can be identified during the assessment of risk factors.

Assessment of OHS risk factors for grief

Emotional safety in OHS risk assessment
The process of OHS risk assessment for staff involves creating an atmosphere of emotional safety based upon listening, clarifying, containing, empathy, respect, being genuine, being ethical, and respecting difference. It is important to create an atmosphere of emotional safety because the conduct of the risk assessment on grieving people may exacerbate risks associated with their anxiety, stress, anger, or disrupted communication. A Workplace Health and Safety Consultant in grief and loss support may be used to support managers/supervisors carry out this task.

Using established OHS procedures
The risk assessment will use the company's existing procedures for OHS risk assessment. The assessment may use individual interviews/discussion with employees, a group discussion, or written contributions from staff listing their concerns. Employees need to be encouraged to identify their concerns, fears, ideas, skills and experiences dealing with dying, death, loss and grief.

OHS risk factors for grief
Risk factors for how staff grieve in response to the death of a work colleague or the family member of a workmate may include:

- Staff members relationship with the person who died. Key relationship factors include whether the staff person was a witness to the death, and the length and level of intimacy of the relationship with the person who died. The work role of the person who died may also effect how staff function.
- How the person died. Death by suicide may be more socially unspeakable than other causes, such as life-threatening illness.
- Where the person died if they died at work, especially in relation to staff work stations or work sites.
- Staff members' own coping styles. The level of emotional closeness amongst staff in the workplace may also effect how staff grieve after a sudden death at work.
- Staff members' past history of grief and trauma. Grief that has not been resolved from an earlier loss may be triggered by the current bereavement, and cause a more intense grief reaction than may have been expected.
- Social factors, such as attitudes to grief and trauma in the workplace.

Assessing the particular and the general
This assessment guide acknowledges that the factors effecting staff grief and trauma responses to death are complex and diverse. It is important to assess the impact of these risk factors for each employee affected by the death, and for the work group as a whole.

updated – April 2006
Palliative Care Victoria