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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Welcome, Law Students

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES?

You arrive at your office and discover that one of your colleagues has experienced a death in the family. Your response will likely be influenced by your own experiences. You may feel a wave of emotion, a temptation to jump in and “fix” things, or a desire to run in the other direction. Whatever your initial reaction, pause for a moment. Hearing about a death in a friend’s family may bring up memories of your own losses. Your awareness of your emotions presents you with choices. Instead of letting your feelings control you, decide how you want to respond. You might choose to set your own emotions aside for the moment so that you can focus on your grieving colleague. Or you might first need to take some time to deal with your own grief issues.

When you are ready to offer support, here are some things to consider:

- Acknowledge your own emotional response, but don’t let it get in the way of ultimately supporting your colleague. Don’t allow your own discomfort with death and dying to distance you from your friend.

- A simple statement like “I’m so sorry to hear about the death in your family” will convey your concern. A follow-up question like “Would you like to talk about it?” lets your friend know that you would like to be supportive. It also gives him or her the option to share more about the situation with you.

- Take your cue from the bereaved. If your colleague doesn’t want to talk about the loss, respect his or her wishes, but let your colleague know you are available if he or she would like to talk later.

- LISTEN. Allow your friend to tell his or her story in the person’s own way and at his or her own pace. Each person’s experience of grief is unique. Try not to use clichés or tell the person that you “know how they feel.” Resist the temptation to talk about the deaths in your life. What was helpful for you may not be helpful for someone else.

- Validate what the person is feeling and remember that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve a death. Grieving is not a linear process or a series of steps to be taken. Each person will find his or her own individual way through the ongoing process.

- People often benefit from being able to process smaller bits and pieces of an overwhelming experience over time. Be prepared to listen to your colleague’s story more than once. Give your friend time, and be patient.

- Offer concrete support. A person who has just suffered an unexpected loss may be disorganized and a bit confused. Find something tangible to do. Mow the lawn, offer to babysit the kids, bring food, make a contribution to a charitable cause in memory of the deceased, or go for a walk with your friend. Encourage him or her to engage in self-care and accept offers of assistance.

- Stay in touch. Long after the funeral or memorial service is over and the out-of-town relatives have gone home, check in on your friend and ask how he or she is doing. Remember that anniversary dates and upcoming holidays may be more difficult for your colleague in the days,

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Your colleague may have a wide range of emotional and/or physical responses to the death. Grieving can be difficult work, both emotionally and physically. People may feel shocked, angry, irritable, sad, guilty, all of the above, or none of the above. They may struggle with difficulty concentrating at work, physical aches and pains, unexpected tearfulness, or disruptions in eating or sleeping patterns. All of these may be normal expressions of grief that someone may experience as part of the grieving process.

We all have the capacity to heal. Support can be very helpful to a person grieving a loss. What truly matters most is that your friend feels heard and understood.

The OAAP is offering a grief support group this fall. For more information, see the accompanying box on this page.

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Ms. Parker is a licensed clinical social worker and therapist who specializes in relationship-based counseling with children and families. She also has special training in issues surrounding death and dying.