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Death in the Workplace: Should we care?

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With the ageing of our population and the increased numbers of workers over 50 (many of whom are struggling to support elderly, dying parents), issues around illness, death, and dying have surfaced in the workplace.

But, one might ask, should employers really care or be concerned about such developments? The answer is “yes”.

The Grief Recovery Institute Educational Foundation, a non-profit organization that creates and establishes programs for individuals and organizations to promote recovery from losses of all types, estimates that the annual economic impact of grief on American business is \$37.5 billion (US). This is based on estimations of lost effective work time, lost productivity, lost sales, accidents and illnesses affecting work time, business losses as the result of poor decision-making, and employee wage and benefit statistics. Unfortunately, no comparable statistics are available for Canada.

For economic and humanitarian reasons, then, it is incumbent upon employers to more effectively deal with death in the workplace. There are a number of helpful interventions that can be considered

including: make sure employees are aware of the death and the funeral arrangements, and ensure that anyone wishing to attend the funeral can do so; familiarize yourself with different ethnic, cultural, and religious bereavement practices; make grieving employees fully aware of EAP benefits; refer to community resources if EAP benefits are not available, or if continued support is needed; where possible, use meaningful rituals within the workplace to facilitate grieving, e.g., conduct a memorial service (and invite the family), name a company event in memory of a deceased employee, plant a tree, make a donation to a charity, or establish a scholarship fund; be flexible with hours and time off (perhaps a temporary re-assignment of duties might help); and, if the grief response is complicated (e.g., by depression, anxiety, or a posttraumatic stress reaction), refer to a qualified practitioner. Importantly, be proactive and review your policies regarding illness, dying, death, and grief in the workplace, provide training and education where necessary, have skilled interventions and debriefing in place, and establish a referral network of qualified, mental health practitioners.

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