

TipSheet: How to Support Someone After a Workplace Tragedy

It's only human to feel awkward and unsure when someone you know experiences a work-related tragedy. You don't want to intrude on their grief, and you're afraid you'll say the wrong thing.

When a tragedy occurs, we need other people more than ever – sometimes for practical, physical help and almost always for emotional support. But a recent survey by Threads of Life demonstrates that many of those affected by a work-related tragedy don't have the human support that would help them heal.

You can help be that support for your friend, co-worker or neighbour, with these tips from Threads of Life families.



Recognize grief



Listen



Be there

Tip # 1: Recognize grief

We associate grief with death, but there are many types of grief, connected with many types of losses. People may grieve because a loved one has died, and they may also grieve the loss of the life they expected, loss of a job, loss of favourite activities, loss of a home or friends. All these types of grief need to be recognized and supported. To continue to heal and find a new normal for their lives, it's important that those coping with workplace tragedy feel supported not just in the period immediately after the tragedy, but in the weeks, months and years that follow.



Emotional support translates into taking time, listening, and keeping in touch.



Top tip

Our family members' top piece of advice? **Keep in touch.** In the days and weeks after a tragedy, there may be lots of support from friends and family, but over time that wanes. People appreciate you checking in over the months and years to come:

- Phone or send a card or letter to ask how they're doing.
- Arrange to go for a walk each week
- Remember anniversaries of the injury, death or diagnosis

Survey highlights: Things a friend could do to offer their support after a tragedy.

- Just listen to their story as many times as they need to tell it without trying to fix anything.
- Acknowledge the pain even though you may not understand it.
- Tell them you're bringing supper on Tuesday at 6 p.m. and will stay for the evening. You can help with anything that needs doing, then.
- Say you're coming over this afternoon and will go through the sympathy cards with them and write thank yous.
- When you're on your way to the store, call and ask what you can pick up for them.
- Children are often forgotten in their grief. They need more attention. People focus on the adults. Our children's lives have been forever changed too, and their friends do not know how to act, what to say.
- Do something to honour the person injured, ill or who died. Acts of kindness are appreciated. We love those gestures.



Tip # 2: Listen

"Just someone being there listening was how I was able to get through a lot of it," one respondent commented in our survey. Learn about active listening and practice that – most people after a tragedy are not looking for advice or even reassurance. Let them talk, even if they are repeating. Let them say the name and talk about their loved one. Share a favourite story about someone who has died, or about the past. One family member said "Talking about my loved one brings such joy and if we cry when you say their name, that is a gift. It is a gift that you speak of them and I am truly grateful."



Tip # 3: Be there

It's common to tell individuals coping with a tragedy "let me know if I can help". But people may not feel comfortable asking for support, or may not even realize what support they need. Be there for whatever they might need – emotional or practical – and continue to be there over time. The support needed will vary as time passes following the tragedy, and depending on the nature of the tragedy and the situation of the individual. Families appreciate when others demonstrate thoughtful consideration of what might be helpful. Often this is practical assistance (help with laundry, meals etc.) when the tragedy is new, and more emotional support (phone calls, going out for a coffee, hugs) as time passes. For families providing care for an injured or ill member or coping with tragedy while caring for young children, the need for practical support continues. "While some of those closest to me, for reasons of their own, could not be there for me, I had extended family and a few friends who have tremendously supported me," one mother said. "I still have a few who always make sure that on [my son's] anniversary and birthday, I am kept busy and don't have to be alone."

Most people who have experienced a tragedy understand that those around them feel uncomfortable and may not know how to act. But there are few examples of **what not to do or say**. Any statement beginning with "at least" will probably not be helpful. Our survey respondents also listed giving advice, telling them to 'get over it', and trying to hurry them through their healing, as not helpful after the tragedy. Other comments:



Top tip

- Having people tell you 'at least you're not dead'. Already at an all time low and this doesn't help.
- Telling me to be strong for my mother. I was hurting just as much. Or saying he is in a better place - he had so much life left to live.
- People that try to rush you through your grief; there is no timeline.



Practical support translates into offering help with errands, making a meal, or going for a walk.

If a work-related fatality, life-altering injury or occupational disease has affected you or your family, Threads of Life can help. Visit <https://threadsoflife.ca/find-support/>

If you'd like to refer someone you know to Threads of Life, please provide our web address or contact us for a brochure or wallet card you can pass along:
contact@threadsoflife.ca