**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Transcript of ‘Experiencing the Death of a Colleague in Health or Social Care: Supporting Yourself and Those Around You’ Animation**

Strong relationships often form between those of us working in health and social care. A person may touch the lives of their colleagues and others who they will encounter in the course of their work in different ways. This is regardless of profession, professional relationship or the length of time spent working together. Experiencing the death of a colleague can have a significant impact on each of us and the dynamics of the teams we work in. Waves of grief may also be felt across the wider team and organisation.

Finding out that a colleague has died will often come with shock, sadness and questions about what happened. We may think back to our last interaction, or any work we've been involved in together. There are no rules for how we'll react to the news, everyone will respond differently. It may be helpful to take a moment to pause and gather your thoughts. Think about whether you feel safe and able to work. In these exceptional circumstances systems should be adaptable to provide cover so that services can continue. Emergency cover may need to be arranged. It's sensible to inform anyone who is

providing this of the circumstances. Be considerate and supportive of one another. Try to show care and compassion as you all deal with the news.

If you're one of the first people to hear about your colleague's death, you may worry about the responsibility of sharing the news. Even if you've been involved in sharing bad news or encountering people who are bereaved in the course of your work, it can feel very different to be communicating the news of the death of a colleague to your peers. Don't be afraid to acknowledge how you're all feeling and the potential uncertainty about what this means for your team. News can spread very quickly, particularly over social media. So, if you feel able, it may be helpful to think about any individuals, such as previous colleagues who may benefit from personal contact and support.

Being in the workplace can naturally stir up feelings of grief. There may be unexpected reminders of the person who's died. You might see their name on IT systems, a mug they always liked to use, or the desk where they sat. In the initial days and weeks, it may be helpful to have a dedicated quiet space available for reflection, to talk about the person and share memories. Consider also the different experiences for those colleagues who are working remotely and how they might receive support.

People may never have experienced this situation before, and they might not get everything right. We can often wonder what the best words are to use when someone has died. Whilst there aren't necessarily any perfect things to say, simple acknowledgements of the fact you're thinking of each other and an understanding that you may need to step out of the work environment can help people feel less isolated in their grief. Try to focus on supporting each other, giving everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, and being compassionate. Be patient with yourself and those around you. Experiencing the death of a colleague can affect you in many ways at work, and at home too.

Some situations may be particularly difficult or require additional support, such as a sudden or unexpected death, or a possible suicide. These may bring up further feelings of distress or guilt. In the workplace, try to avoid any speculation on the circumstances of a colleague's death. Focus on remembering the person, who they were and acknowledging the work they did. Grief does not know the hierarchy that often exists in health and social care settings. It can spread across grades, professions, and locations. Try not to make assumptions about who will be most significantly affected and avoid comparing your grief to others. If you think that you'd benefit from specific support, ask about how this can be made available to you. Managers may not have experienced this before but should be understanding of the time and resources required to support their team.

Whilst we're each likely to respond differently to the death of a colleague, grief in the workplace is likely to be a shared experience. Finding ways to commemorate and capture memories of a colleague who has died can be valuable and supportive for us and can be appreciated by their family and friends. Acknowledging the colleague's impact on the workplace can be important at other transition points, such as when the individual's post is readvertised, both for ourselves and any future colleagues. Examples could include a minute's silence, creating a memorial or raising money for a charity that was important to the person. A condolence book can provide an opportunity to reflect on our experiences of working with them. It can make a valuable connection with the person's family, providing a way to share stories of their work and friendships. It may also be important to mark the day of the person's funeral in the workplace, for those who are unable to or who decide not to attend.

Experiencing the death of a colleague can affect individuals, teams and organisations in many ways, perhaps for a considerable period of time. Regardless of your role or professional relationship with the person who has died, everyone should be encouraged to ask for help if they need it. Be kind to yourself and one another, be understanding and be compassionate. It's important that individuals and the team are supported to recover, restore and renew.

The film was produced in June 2023 and can be found at [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/) or <https://vimeo.com/833671191>

For more information visit [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/) or contact SupportAroundDeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk

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