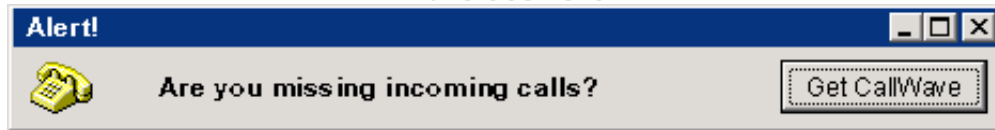


Death and Dying

Advertisement

An advertisement window with a blue title bar that says "Alert!". On the left is a yellow telephone icon. The main text asks "Are you missing incoming calls?". On the right is a button that says "Get CallWave".

Returning to Work After a Loss

Losing a loved one is a painful experience that can severely disrupt our daily activities. It can be especially difficult to return to work after a loved one has died. Employers often give employees a few days off of work for bereavement, but the amount of time off varies from employer to employer. You may not be given enough paid time off to fully grieve. Since most people have financial obligations that may limit the amount of time that they can stay home, the choice of when to return to work can be a difficult one. No matter how much time we have off from work to grieve, going back to work can be difficult and will have an emotional impact.

Several fears can cause us to postpone returning to work as long as possible. Often, we are unsure how our co-workers and friends may act towards us. After hearing people's sympathies over and over for days, it can be unnerving to go through the whole process again with a new set of people. We may be uncomfortable answering questions about what happened or how our loved one died. Although coworkers do not mean to make us feel uncomfortable, their questions can make us feel the pain of our loss all over again. While everyone will probably be generally sympathetic, we can feel like we are being treated differently. Some co-workers and employers may be unsure how to act around us and may avoid us out of fear of saying something wrong. Many do not know what to say or how to act and may appear standoffish. Try not to take this personally, and remember that those around you may be just as scared and uncomfortable as you are. Things will return to normal in time.

Another aspect of returning to work that can be hard to deal with is our own emotional state. We may be unsure how we are going to act or how our grief is going to affect our work. Grief can make it hard to concentrate on the task at hand or we may find our minds drifting to think about all that has happened. The very fact that we left work suddenly can make returning stressful and difficult. There may be excess work to catch up on and loose ends to tie up. It is easy to become overwhelmed when we stop to think about all that we've missed at work or how behind we have gotten. When these feelings of being overwhelmed are combined with our initial loss, it can be hard to control our emotions. Concentration and motivation suffer during bereavement. While we may find ourselves almost hopelessly behind at work, we may lack the motivation or desire to jump in and get everything done. In addition you may find yourself mentally and physically exhausted and feel incapable to make an impact. Depression, which sometimes follows a loss, can also make us apathetic about work and our work relationships.

Try to remember that what you are feeling is normal and will subside with

time. In the meantime, there are things that you can do to make returning to work easier. It is very important to communicate with your employer so you both have a clear outlook of what is expected. Some larger companies may have a Human Resources, or HR Department, that will handle this type of employee issue. Stop by and see what resources are available to you. Some companies offer short term counseling to their employees in need or may otherwise be able to help you communicate with your managers when you are uncomfortable doing it alone. Talk to your supervisor about workload when your return, If you find yourself too far behind, ask for help. If you feel particularly uncomfortable, discuss coming in for a few half days before jumping into things full swing.

Above all, pay attention to how you are feeling and don't push yourself too hard. It may be tempting to go overboard by completely preoccupying your mind with work, but sooner or later, you will have to deal with your emotions. Find a quiet place at work to reflect or cry alone when you need it in lieu of crying in front of your coworkers. Take it slow, give yourself frequent breaks, and communicate with your employer. Remember that nobody expects you to return to work completely normal, like nothing happened. Grieving is a process that takes time. Be patient with yourself and others while you are healing. Things will return to normal in time.

~ Michele Baskin-Jones

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