

# 'Happy' Holidays? Not Necessarily



By **Karla Wheeler**

The loss of a loved one, especially an employee at a small, tight-knit company, can dim the brightest of holidays. However, there are some practical steps that managers and EAPs can take to help boost morale and keep productivity from plummeting.

## Choose Rituals Wisely

Decide which holiday departmental rituals and customs feel right, and which ones seem too stressful. Some traditions, such as a couples' dinner and dance event at the same country club where everyone has partied for years, might seem like a downer for the group. Fun-loving Marianne will be missed, and her bereaved husband would probably feel uncomfortable attending solo.

Ask employees for alternative suggestions, perhaps an event held on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, with parents and children invited. Such camaraderie would

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likely be very healing, especially for Marianne's family.

## Memorial Gifts

Rather than the time-worn gift exchange among employees, ask staff to consider giving a gift to a cause or charity that was important to the deceased employee. If Marianne was an animal lover, you might choose the local humane society. That's because compassionate initiatives, like donating to a charity, help employees work through the grieving process.

## The Empty Chair

At a December staff meeting, go ahead and leave the deceased employee's chair in its usual spot. Everyone is feeling the impact of the empty chair, so why not take time to acknowledge this loss? Ask each employee to say something about Marianne, if they are comfortable doing so.

For instance, they might share a fond or funny remembrance — or, perhaps a co-worker will want to express some of the many reasons that Marianne is missed. Validate each person's approach, and reaffirm that together you will all get through this time of sadness.

## Grief is a Process

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that each of us heals from a major loss in our own way and on our own

timetable. Camaraderie and support can be powerful healers within an office. But while one worker might have deep faith from which to draw to sustain him/her, another person might feel "rocked to the core."

Be aware of triggers that can bring on a grief attack. For example, perhaps a long-time customer calls to wish Marianne happy holidays and needs to be told of her recent passing. Be gentle and honor where each employee is in their journey through grief.

## Grief Support Meetings

If the emotional trauma of the death is adversely affecting productivity in certain employees, grief support meetings led by an EAP and/or other resources may be helpful.

## Receive the Joy

Even when a recent death has turned our world upside down, it's still OK to enjoy the holiday season. When we're mourning, we sometimes feel guilty about laughing and having a good time. Give yourself permission to experience those moments of joy. You will be honoring the memory of the employee. ■

*Karla Wheeler is the founder of Quality of Life Publishing Co., a direct outgrowth of her personal and professional hospice experience. She is the author of grief support books. For more information, visit [www.qolpublishing.com](http://www.qolpublishing.com). Editor's note: EAR anticipates covering grief in greater detail in an early 2011 cover article. Watch for it.*