

# Examining How Employees Deal with Their Colleagues' Death

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## Abstract

The current study looks into the emotional process of mourning especially the way of dealing with it among employees who have lost their colleagues in unexpected events. The study was of qualitative type in which seven employees working in district 3 of Isfahan Education office were interviewed using semi-structured interview method with open questions. These participants were selected through purposive/theoretical sampling procedure until saturation point. To analyze data, content analysis of interviews, cyclical analysis method, and development and extension of themes as well as merging them by paradigm were utilized. The study eventually revealed that the participants cope with the issue of their colleague's death in different ways especially referring to fate and destiny, God's wisdom, praying, and charity giving. However, many of the participants had not accepted the issue of death yet. This, in turn, implies differences in the participants' views toward life and also differences in their experiences.

**Key words:** Mourning; Colleague's death; Dealing with subject.

## Introduction

Mourning is a natural phenomenon that exists in all human societies but in different ways and forms in different cultures. It involves both internal phenomena (thoughts and feelings) and external ones (mourning-related behaviors such as crying, wearing black clothes, etc.) (1). Mourning typically refers to multitude of complicated reactions that happen following death of a beloved person. To put it more precisely, while mourning is defined as a mental feeling emanated from beloved death, mourning process is used to refer to the process of disbandment of mourning (2).

People often show common behaviors in their life after death of an important person's death. Physical ones usually improve sooner than emotional ones as they might remain in persons without being aware of them. The way mourning shows up depends on different factors such as personality, strategies taken to deal with problems, their attitude toward the world, impact of environment on death, their supportive system, and their general experience. In psychology, absence and change are two components of mourning. When a close person dies, not only that person dies but also the roles symbolizing him disappear. Thus, the mourning person has to face several lacks and dealing with them takes time and energy (3).

Although natural sadness has some joint features such as sad temperament and social isolation (depression), it often does not need treatment. In fact, most of people who suffer from mourning, do not pursue treatment and when sad person comes to terms with the lack, mourning symptoms mitigates within some months (4). Durability and pretention of normal mourning is remarkably different in different cultural groups. Mourning typically lasts from six months to one year. Some of the symptoms may even last for one to two years (5). However, people oftentimes are bereft of adequate supports to deal with mourning. Studies have also indicated that roughly 10 to 15 % of people who have lost a beloved experience complicated mourning (6).

Given the importance of the subject, the current study set out to examine the emotional processes of mourning resulted from unexpected death of a colleague among employees of Isfahan education office, district 3.

## Materials and Methods

### *Statistical Population*

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants so that their conditions and features could be in line with the study purposes. The sampling procedure continued until saturation point. Given the keys of recognizing mourning and tracking stages of mourning in the participants, the study was chosen to be of qualitative type. To gather data, semi-structured interview with open items was utilized for seven employees who were directly related to these events. Since the participants were allowed to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the interviews had adequate flexibility. Furthermore, their permission was also sought to record their responses for further transcription and analysis.

*Interviews Pattern*

The order of items was not similar for all the participants and it depends of the stage of the study and their responses. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes (on average 40 minutes). It was also tried to avoid any orientation in their responses. To extract data more precisely, note taking and data recording techniques were also used so that the interviewees’ verbal and non-verbal data could be gathered. The question assessed was:

1. How the employees deal with the sadness of their colleague’s unexpected death?

*Data Coding*

Immediately after interviews, the analysis process started. Words and sentences were continuously compared to examine the similarities and differences of data. The parts that conveyed the same sense were marked, summarized, and coded. The main codes of interview were then categorized and their sub-categories were also specified. To do the coding process, relevant concepts were pinpointed, named, transported, reduced, and labeled. While the categories and sub-categories were being fulfilled, the related theory also appeared and completed. This process involved several listening to and reading of recorded data which, in turn, made the researcher interact with data and perceive the studied phenomenon (7). All data were coded. The primary codes were temporary and were modified in the analysis procedure. Codes were directly gained from data and pre-perceived ideas were avoided (7).

The primary categories created in open coding stage were constantly compared and contrasted and similar codes and subcategories were merged and labeled more abstractly. This also ensured their being really relevant. In general, after the interviews, 33 primary categories and 160 open codes were obtained.

*Data Analysis*

The analysis process was fulfilled through content analysis and cyclical analysis methods. To be more precise, the collected data were reduced, organized, analyzed, and interpreted. The participants’ responses in the interviews were recorded and transcribed word by word for further analysis (8-11).

**Results**

*The way employees deal with the sadness of their colleague’s unexpected death*

The employees taking part in the study used different ways to deal with their colleague’s unexpected death. Factors such as their attitude toward death and their intellectual interpretations about death, their relevant previous experiences, and the way they heard about their colleague’s death affected the way they dealt with death of their colleague.

**Table 1.** Coded concepts and issues and supporting quotations of participants.

Related Codes	Supporting Quotations	
Positive Intellectual Interpretations	God’s wisdom	It was God’s wisdom
	Fate and Destiny	This death happened because it was fate
	God’s expediency	It is a kind of test for all of us and good for those who pass it successfully
	God’s test	Only God knows what is good for us
Failure Toleration	Toleration and patience	We can feel relaxed by being patient at time of disaster and sadness
	Reliance	It makes me calm to think about the problems of Imams and rely on God

	Asking for mercy, praying, and charity giving	I pray for him and give charity to make his soul be in peace. These measures makes me calm too
Positive Intellectual interpretation to death	Relaxed	He got relieved from problems and pains
	Mercy	Life after death is hopefully better for him as he is nearer to God's mercy
	Calmness	He is in peace as he was a good person
		I used to be bothered more when a person died as I could not feel relaxed for some time. But nowadays I feel less bothered as I hear more death news
Effect of previous experiences	Predictable	It is hard to believe but he are used to it
	Believable	Have you heard that: "every single moment I hear new sad news? It applies to me. It is becoming part of life for me
	Death experience as part of life	These days, death has become so close to our lives
	Acceptance	In the past, we heard less death news or it was more painful for us. Nowadays, although we still feel sad, we can deal with it sooner and more easily
The way they heard about death	Unexpected death	Death of Mr. "S" was easy to accept because it was close to the event. But death of Mr. "H" was hard to believe
	Lack of Acceptance	I was on vacation and nobody told me about his death. When I got back to work and figured out at the door, I felt bad. Thinking about him still bothers me
	Surprise	I was with him until 2.30 p.m. But at 7.00 I was told he died
	Death in conditions of hope to Recovery	When he was at death's bed, I got daily news about his conditions and repeatedly said he would recover and get better. Its death after about one month was really hard to accept

Table 2 shows the exploration and reconsideration of emotional states  
**Table 2.** The exploration and reconsideration of emotional states related to the way employees dealt with the unexpected death of their colleague

Studied States	Interpretation
Positive Intellectual interpretation	Colleagues’ belief that pending death refers to a precocious death caused by accidents, diseases, etc. Death is, in fact, based on God’s fate and destiny
Failure Toleration	Failure toleration refers to the degree of mental pressure that a person can stand before their behavior becomes disrupted. According to Roznovaig (1944), failure toleration is one’s capability to resist against failure without showing inappropriate behaviors. The employees tolerated their colleague’s death by relying on God, praying, and charity giving
Positive Intellectual interpretation to death	Death is one of the hotly discussed issues in all religions especially Islam in which belief in the other world and life after death is a basic precept. Attitude to death is a set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses toward death. These attitudes can be positive or negative. In this study, the employees had positive intellectual attitudes
Previous experience	Previous mourning experiences can make death more believable and easier to accept
The way they heard about death	The way we hear about death. The present study the way the employees were informed about death was examined. It was noticed that the more sudden and unexpected informing, the harder to deal with the colleague’s death

**Discussion**

After their colleague’s death, the employees manifested emotions that were due to their relationship and feelings with the deceased. Their attitude toward life, death, and absence caused them to show these emotions. Crying, shock and disbelief, wrath and guilty feeling, stress and excitability, looking for the deceased, mental preoccupation, misery feeling, indifference, isolation, inability to decide, physical problems (headache, stomachache, sweating, etc.), cognitive disorders (lack of concentration, forgetfulness, etc.), and emotional problems (mental tiredness, feeling of sadness, crying, sighing, wrath, etc.) were among the symptoms observed in these people in different degrees. These findings were in accordance with these studies’ findings: A previous study (12) titled as “cognitive

performance in complicated mourning” showing that people’s cognitive performance and attention to complicated mourning was lower than that in control group. Song and colleagues also revealed that there was a negative significant correlation between degree of mourning and physical health and person’s judgment with others (responsibility). Boolin and colleagues (2003) (13) also carried out a study to examine the relationship between negative knowing and emotional problems after mourning. In this study, 329 mourners were examined in terms of negative general beliefs, knowing, self-criticism, negative knowing about others’ responses after absence and negative ones about their own mourning reactions. The results of these studies showed that each of these cognitive variables were significantly related to harmful mourning symptoms, depression, and anxiety even after statistical controlling of background variables and variables pertinent to absence. Other studies have investigated the role of threatening interpretations more and showed that these interpretations are strongly correlated with depression and complicated mourning.

The study showed that all the four cognitive variables (about self, life, future, and self-mourning reactions) and avoidance variable are strongly and significantly correlated with the current and past symptoms levels in the mourners. The study also showed that the single variable of avoidance can predict depression. Two other studies also uncovered that symptoms of complicated mourning, depression, and anxiety are closely related to special kinds of negative responses. Negative beliefs about self, the world, and future and also threatening interpretations are from mourning effects have the strongest correlations with these symptoms. Similarly, Manns (2011) (14) conducted a study to increase the understanding of sadness resulted from mourning among employees and its effects on work place and activity of the organization for supporting them. The study showed that colleague’s death led to mitigation of concentration, energy, interest, and performance of the employees.

Given issues such as the expressed attitude of the employees toward death and life, their intellectual interpretations about death, their remarks about toleration of failures, their remarks affected by their previous experiences about death, the way they heard about death of their colleague, the participants used different ways to deal with their colleague’s death (15-18).

Regarding the limitations of the present study, some points can be mentioned. The findings of the study cannot be generalized to other types of absence because the study deals with a specific kind of lack. Furthermore, because the participants considered emotions related to mourning to be private, the employees did not show high willingness to take part in the interview. The participants also sometimes resisted to offer correct responses. The other limitation was that it was impossible to examine the emotions related to mourning after one year due to time limitations. Finally, there were limited sources and studies that have directly dealt with the issue of colleagues’ mourning.

### **Conclusions**

The results of the present study unraveled that the employees mostly referred to positive intellectual concepts, toleration of failure, positive intellectual view to death, impact of previous experiences, and their awareness of death. To put it more clearly, the results of interviews showed that a large percentage of the employees tried to deal with their colleague’s death by resorting to God’s wisdom and contrivance, toleration and patience, reliance on God, praying for blessing, praying and charity giving for the deceased person, and also considering this point that death is an inevitable part of life. However, given the high frequency of lack of acceptance of death by some of the employees, it can be stated that offering psychological programs to people who have lost their colleagues can not only mitigate the mourning effects, but also improve their behaviors and speed up the process of returning to normal conditions in life.

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