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Working Through Caregiver Grief

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When Helen Fitzgerald's husband, Jerry, died of brain cancer, her two-year stint as his caregiver ended. For her, going back to work became an escape from her grief.

Fitzgerald, now certified in thanatology, the research and study of death, has turned her caregiving experience into a lifelong mission. She travels the country and talks with counselors and businesses about grief in school or the workplace, and is also the training director for the American Hospice Foundation.

“When Jerry was hospitalized and eventually died, my supervisor told me to take two to three weeks off of work,” Fitzgerald says. “And that was the worst kind of advice. Going back to work was a part of my life that Jerry wasn't a part of, and it gave me a sense of freedom from that grief.”

Experts recommend bereaved caregivers find a routine after a loved one's death, either by returning to work or setting up another type of schedule instead of being home alone. “Caregivers are accustomed to every minute of every day being tied up with medicine and appointments and therapy, and when that person dies, they have all this free time and they don't know what to do with it,” Fitzgerald says. But she also cautions that it's best to ease back into the workplace and not immediately resume a full-time job. Many will find the first day back the hardest because of constant reminders from thoughtful coworkers.

“Come in for lunch or half a day to get the ‘I'm sorries’ out of the way,” Fitzgerald says. “People don't know what else to say, but it's better than not saying anything at all.” Fitzgerald also recommends caregivers let coworkers know the amount or type of support they need.

Caregivers may want to set up weekly or biweekly meetings with their supervisor to bring issues out in the open, such as job performance, but also to discuss support or job assistance for the caregiver. Talking about how they are coping mentally and emotionally and what their needs are in the upcoming months may also be helpful. If a job position requires exactness, such as accounting or distributing medicine, bereaved caregivers may want to ask a coworker to double-check their work for a time. Let coworkers and supervisors know you might be forgetful, unfocused or short on patience for a while.

For some caregivers, it may take time to open up about their loss. “They might not want to talk so openly because they may feel they're going to cry or break down,” says Dominick D. Bonanno, a licensed clinical social worker at CancerCare who frequently counsels grieving caregivers.

Many companies are now offering employee assistance programs that provide free, confidential counseling and seminars on grief, which improves supervisors'

and employees' reactions to grief. Because there is no outward sign of grieving now as there was in the past, such as wearing black, it's easy for others to forget, Fitzgerald says. "We shouldn't expect coworkers to remember we might be grieving during the holidays or on the anniversary of the death, so you might want to mention that the next couple of days or weeks might be hard for you."