

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Handling Loss and Grief in the Greenhouse

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For this month, I was going to write about another topic, but events that occurred the week of December 9 compelled me to write about those instead.

The topic is death in the workplace and how to struggle through the mass grief and myriad of emotions that affect everyone at the site. We know we work long hours in this industry, and partially due to this, our co-workers become like a second family. I would like to think that we have an actual comradery and genuine affection for each other, as well as the long hours that bring us together. When there's a sudden loss of one of these members, it's felt as keenly as the loss of a blood family member.

That week, towards the end of the workday, a long-term, highly regarded employee suddenly passed out on our loading dock. 911 was called and we fortunately had a very qualified dispatcher that managed to get paramedics to our site within 15 minutes (like most growing grounds, we're off the beaten path in what's considered the countryside of San Diego County).

At this time, the employee had regained consciousness, saying he felt fine. The paramedics arrived and were routinely checking him when he went into cardiac arrest and they began CPR. Watching this, trying to keep myself and the dock workers calm, wanting to provide comfort or words of encouragement, the minutes felt like hours. When a helicopter was summoned, we knew things were not going well. After numerous cardiac events and resuscitations, the employee was bundled onto the helicopter while we watched and prayed all would be well. The entire event took less than an hour.

Later that night, I received a call that he had passed. He was 45 years old and in seemingly good health. He had what I now know is called a silent heart attack and is commonly associated with diabetes, which he had.

The sudden loss, the questions, the site-wide grief were palpable the next day. While I attempted to manage my grief mainly alone, the questions of how to help everyone else on site were floating around. Like so many horticultural production sites, we have a large Hispanic population and culturally grief and loss are expressed differently within their community in a more communal way, with grief felt deeply and intensely when compared to other cultures.

The duration, frequency and intensity of the grief process is impacted by the manner of death and is exacerbated if the death is unexpected, which is exactly what occurred on our loading dock. It was important for us quickly to bring everyone together to discuss what happened, let people talk about what the deceased meant to us and to set up the

remembrance shrine with pictures, candles, flowers, beloved effects and other offerings. Spanish-speaking grief counselors were brought on site, and although no one took the offer, people could leave and take a paid day. Everyone preferred to stay together with their work family and share their grief rather than bear it alone.

With a loss, come regrets and the should-haves. If we'd known, if we'd administered aspirin (which we legally cannot), if we'd done more to offer comfort. While these thoughts cannot change the past, it causes me to pause and think that we need to have a plan within our sites for what to do when someone suddenly falls gravely ill or is found in a helpless condition. Here are a few of my thoughts:

- Have some blankets on-hand stored for emergencies when the injured cannot be moved. You don't want the injured to have to sit or lie on a cold, dirty dock.
- Have some education about heart attack signs and the different types of heart attacks. Our employee had diabetes and diabetics have a higher rate of silent heart attacks.
- Expand this education to include strokes and other health issues.
- Have aspirin on-hand. This is a touchy subject and legally we're not allowed to administer aspirin. But chewing aspirin during a heart attack can be the difference between life and death.
- Try to offer comfort and encouraging words. I'm still not sure if the paramedics would have let one of us hold his hand or speak to him during resuscitations, but studies have shown unconscious people still know when people are praying or rooting for them.

Lastly, diabetes is a common health issue within many communities and this is mainly linked to diets. With the surge of urban, community gardens providing fresh, free or low-cost produce, it seems growers can respond by maintaining similar gardens on our sites. Creating an on-site community garden is one of our tasks, to keep the memory alive of our lost brother and to help prevent further losses like this. **GT**

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