

Grief in the Workplace... ...and how it affects those around you

By Rosie Mendez

What is grief? Grief is the internal anguish bereaved persons feel in response to a loss or the death of someone or something. Emotions such as anger, guilt, relief, fear, and sadness occur. Grieving may or may not be visibly evident.

Employees may have physical responses such as sleeplessness, stomachaches, headaches or loss of appetite. Concentration can become difficult.

Grief is a natural, normal, often deeply painful response to a loss. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be. Everyone expresses grief differently. Every grieving person needs support. Therefore it is important to have information on the grieving process.

“Some employees believe there is a time and a place for everything. Some prefer to work at work and grieve at home. We must remember to respect everybody’s individual needs.”

Losing Someone You Love

Grief is real because loss is real. The pain of loss is intense. *Losing someone you love feels like a part of you has died.* It is especially hard when it happens during or at your place of work.

When you lose someone you love it stays with you for the rest of one’s life. People I work with report that the death of someone you love feels like an arm or a leg has been ripped off. Some describe it as a hole in their heart that never gets filled again.

“How do I go on without my significant other?” How do I get rid of his or her clothes when all I want to do is have their clothes wrapped around me so that I can still feel close?

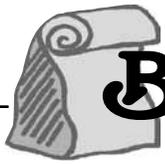
These are all questions that arise. You may experience a feeling of responsibility as if you had something to do with the death of the person – even though that is unlikely the case. *And yet, employees report that they almost always experience blame.* They question their choice of working as opposed to taking care of a loved one who was ill. CHOICES are questioned and actions are questioned. Employees have to live with the consequences of the choice they made in a time of need.

I work with an individual who feels responsible for his brother’s death even though it had been ruled an accident. At the time of the mishap, he was eight years old and his brother was two years old. His little brother ran into the street and a car ran over him. The family appeared to blame him at the beginning but realized that he was too young to be supervising his little brother. Nonetheless, guilt and blame has remained with him even as an adult.

Employees have shared that they feel responsible for a loved one’s death. Their mind tells them that it wasn’t their fault but their heart tells them otherwise. Employees have openly shared their feelings, thoughts, and emotions with questions like, “*Why didn’t I go that extra mile? Why didn’t I pay attention? Why did I let that moment go without doing something?*”

What Do I Do Now?

“*Do I pretend that things are fine? Do I risk opening my heart to individuals that may never know what I am going through?*” Questions like these come to mind as an employee prepares to go back to work after losing a spouse. They report



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being afraid – they’re afraid that once they start crying they will not be able to stop. They’re afraid that their colleagues will treat them differently or look at them differently. They’re afraid of how they will react because grief is something new and they have no idea how to act or what to say. They feel like they’re under a microscope as if everyone is looking at them and waiting for them to break down. That may not be the case, but their life has changed and they are AFRAID. Basically it is a fear of the unknown.

How Do I Cope?

“Where do I begin? Do I just say thank you after they give me their heartfelt sympathy or do I openly share what is really in my heart and cry out my fear – my fear of being alone, the fear of not being able to go on another day. Do I dare reveal my fear of not belonging or my fear of not being able to move on?”

Can an employee openly have a meltdown at work without feeling judged that he or she

Points to Remember

Avoid asking someone if they have “accepted” the death. Acceptance to the grieving is equated to saying they are okay with the fact that their loved one has died. They can be “okay” without believing that dying was okay. Other points to remember:

- Grieving people are broken-hearted, not broke.
- They need to be comforted, not fixed.
- They need to be heard, not talked to.
- They need understanding, not unrealistic expectations.
- They need to be allowed the time they need, not hurried along.
- They need validation, not judgment.
- They need to be able to tell their story as many times as it takes.
- They need to know it’s okay to cry – and not to cry.

- Deb Kosmer

can do longer do their job? Or, do they hide their true feelings and build them up for some future meltdown?

Where Do I Go from Here?

“Do I pretend that I’m okay? Do I ask for help? CAN I ask for help?” These are all questions that come up as employees prepare to return to work. Feelings of having to be “strong” come to mind.

“My mind tells me to move on but my heart is crying to me. Can I have a moment to myself? Don’t judge me, just let me be. I asked to be left alone, as I fear if someone touches me or give me his or her sympathy I will cry out in agony. Don’t touch me; let me be.

“How long will I feel like this? I am told that grief takes as long as it takes, that there is no timetable but IS there? I have more questions than answers. I started questioning everything. I question life. I question whether anybody can understand what I’m going through.

“I cry out for help. Is there a safe place that I can express my feelings, thoughts and emotions? Will my colleagues understand me? Will they be patient with me? Can I go into work?”

Is it Safe Now?

Employees have shared how people grieve differently and how there is no timetable. Grief is like the ocean, sometimes the wave comes in slow and other times the wave hit hard. In fact, a wave of grief can hit so hard that it’s enough to create a meltdown. *“When a meltdown happens or occurs at work, is it safe? Will I lose my job? Will my employer understand?”*

What I have learned working with employees is that everyone grieves differently and it’s **okay**. Some people take weeks, some take years, and some take a lifetime. The bottom line is that whatever time it takes, it takes. IT IS WHAT IT IS.

What to do or say:

- Acknowledge the person’s death.
- Be supportive, be helpful, and above all *listen*.
- Allow for the expression of feelings.



What not to say:

- Do not suggest that someone has grieved long enough.
- Do not indicate that someone should “get over it” and move on.
- Do not act as if nothing has happened.
- Do not say things like, “*I know how you feel, and you’ll be stronger because of this.*”
- Do not say that they are “*in a better place.*” Have YOU died and come back to know that they are indeed in a safer place?
- Do not say, “*They lived a good life.*” How do you know that they did?
- Do you really know them or is this about you?
- Do not say, “*If you need anything let me know.*” Most people don’t know how to ask for help – just do *something*. This is the time to bring groceries, gift cards, pick up prescriptions, go to the cleaners, etc.

Asking for help is NOT a sign of weakness:

- Not everyone talks about his or her grief.
- It is not unusual to experience difficulty thinking or concentrating.
- It’s okay to ask for help because people need help.
- Ask for what you need. Say no if you don’t feel like having company. Ask for someone to sit with you or go to visit someone who will lift your spirits. It’s okay to go out and have lunch, dinner, or a movie. You are not being selfish, you are moving on.
- It’s okay to ask for help when you need it – and from those persons you need assistance from.
- This is not the time to be shy.
- This is the time for you to tell someone HOW to help.

Employees need time to process their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Individuals have shared that it’s okay to tell them that you feel for them, you are there for him or her. Just being there or listening is great.

However, it can’t be overstated: since grieving persons don’t always know how to ask or know what they need, I suggest asking the grieving person about *specific* things you can help with.

Remember, there is no Right or Wrong Way to Grieve

It takes the time it takes.

Crying is good and healing but so is laughter. I am reminded about the time my mother died and I happened to laugh out loud and I offended one of my brothers. He said I was being disrespectful to my mother’s memory and I replied I was honoring her, as she was a very positive and engaging individual who was full of life. We agree to disagree and I respected him.

Some employees want to be left alone. An employee told me that he did not want anyone mentioning his loved one. He wanted to continue to work as if nothing happened. This employee later revealed that if he had let his emotions take over him he would not be able to work.

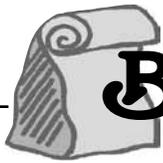
Some employees believe there is a time and a place for everything. Some prefer to work at work and grieve at home. We must remember to respect everybody’s individual needs.

Grieving Takes Time – It is Ongoing

The internal work of grief is a process, a journey. Grief has no date. Each grief has its own imprint. (More about this in the Handout section on page 4.) ■

Rosie Mendez is a licensed professional counselor (LPC) and licensed chemical dependency counselor (LCDC) with over 30 years’ of grief counseling experience. Ms. Mendez thanks Dr. Susan Simpson Hull, Ms. Julie Spears, and Ms. Nancy Bridges for allowing her to serve as Grand Prairie ISD Coordinator of Employee Assistance Program where she is able to serve employees and assist them through their journey.





Grief is an Ongoing Process

As mentioned in the main article, grief comes and goes and no one really knows when a “wave” will hit a grieving person. For instance, some employees have shared that someone may say something totally “foreign” and the grieving person will experience an unexpected meltdown because of some memory that he or she is holding on to – or that triggers their emotions. However, they describe the meltdown as *healing* and not a bad thing at all.

Other recommendations for the EAP practitioner:

- Say what is in your heart, I care, I am with you.
- Silence is golden, sometimes there are no words – therefore don’t say anything.
- Allow for expression of feelings, THEIR feelings not yours.
- Listen, listen, listen, and be nonjudgmental.
- Allow the employee to grieve at his or her own pace. Remember we are all different.
- Be patient.
- Grief is something that the person will never “get over.”

Tips for a grieving employee:

- Talk with those you trust about your feelings.
- Remember that grief issues take time to process and that there is no set timeframe.
- Seek professional support if necessary.
- Resume your normal routine. ■

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Take Care of Yourself!

Personally:

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Slow down and relax.
- Set realistic expectations for yourself.
- Find things you enjoy in life.

Overcome barriers to self-care:

- Maintain good relationships.
- Use common sense.
- Practice moderation.
- Be open to corrective feedback from others.

Ask supervisors and co-workers for help:

- Improve communication – let them know you’re struggling.
- Ask for assistance in modifying your work schedule, if necessary.

- Ask management about forming peer support groups, quality circles, etc.

Develop coping strategies:

- Make sure you have supportive relationships.
- Practice lifestyle management (i.e. work/life balance, etc.).
- Laugh! When you’re grieving, humor can really help.
- **Solicit grieving recommendations from your EAP.**
- Practice methods that will increase relaxation, such as exercise, music, reading, and other hobbies and recreation. ■

Source: Gary Yeast, BA, MS, MS, LMFT, Fellow AAMFT.