

Surviving Grief



In every type of job, eventually, we will experience significant loss either personal, professional or both, and therefore, grief. The grief may result from death in an individual's family, or it may be the death of a coworker or employer. It may be the loss of employment, either from a single dismissal or a significant restructuring and lay off of workers. Whatever the source, the resulting grief can end up being problematic and disruptive to the ecosystem of the workplace.

Types of loss and grief

Some of us only associate grief with the death of a significant other or pet, but people can experience pain after any consequential loss that affects their life. Different types of loss include that of a job or relationship, and in some instances, after the diagnosis of an illness or other major health problems.

There is no one way, or right way, to grieve. However, there is a singularly effective way to receive and empathize with the grieving of others. Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, distinguishes between the disconnecting properties of sympathy and the connection we gain through empathy. She refers to nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman, whose research shows empathy to be: *the capacity to recognize others' perspectives as their authentic experience, to understand others' emotions and articulate them, and to avoid judgment.*¹

Within today's work environment, there are multiple cross sections of cultures and religions. Each culture has a set of beliefs that describe how the world works and people's roles in the world, including their roles in the grieving process.²



It helps to remember that each culture has particular and often unique views about the meaning of life and what happens after we die. In general, ideas about the meaning of death help people make sense of it and cope with its mystery.

Some cultures believe in life as a cyclical rather than linear phenomenon; that we return to life after each death. Others believe that the spirit of someone who has passed directly influences the living family members; after death, the spirit of the individual watches over them.

In each culture, death is associated with a set of rituals and customs to help people with the grieving process, offering ways to process and express their grief.

In some cases, a person's experience of grief may differ with cultural norms; for example, in the case of someone who is quiet and reserved and not quick to cry or express their grief. Some may have a level of despair that feels out of step with the norm, but despite those norms, we need to allow individuals the space to grieve in a way that feels right to them. Although another's rituals may seem foreign compared to those of our own, these routines provide a means for communities to support the bereaved.

People often adopt the beliefs and values of their culture to meet their unique needs and circumstances. As a result of this, grief responses within a culture can vary from person to person. A family with members from more than one cultural background may develop unique rituals and customs, combining elements from several cultures.

A person who is bereaved can often feel lost in the sense of chaos and confusion. Regardless of where they come from, rituals and customs provide a sense of routine and normalcy. They provide direction and structure at a time when the chaos of emotion could easily prevail. Consider the following when a co-worker is grieving:

- What are the bereaved family's beliefs surrounding death?
- What emotions and behaviours are typical for the bereaved person's culture?
- Who should attend certain ceremonies, and how are attendees expected to act and dress?
- What types of offerings, material or emotional, are expected?

- Are there appropriate verbal or written condolences?

Consider talking with someone who shares that same cultural background, or you can start with internet resources if that feels more comfortable. Being ignorant of the cultural differences of grief could cause undue conflict or misunderstanding in the workplace; however, showing compassion and acceptance will create connections and help in the moving forward phase. Here are a few considerations:

When the person returns to work:

1. At the first opportunity, express your condolences (if you have not already done so).
2. Make it as normal as possible. Try not to change your facial expression and tone of voice when speaking with your co-worker.
3. Carry on with normal work routines. If you typically eat lunch together, continue doing so.
4. Try to be sensitive in your conversation. If you are unsure what to say or how to treat them, acknowledge that, and ask them if they wish to discuss the loss, or instead wish to concentrate on workplace tasks. They will tell you what they need and don't need, and you should respect their wishes.

The following examples illustrate things you should avoid saying when trying to support someone who has recently experienced a loss.

What not to say:

1. *"I know how you feel."*

Each loss is different. You could, instead, ask how he or she feels, but only if you know they are okay with talking about the loss at work. Also, don't share your own story of loss as a sign of empathy.

2. *"It's part of God's plan" or "It is God's will."*

This can make people angry and they may respond with, "What plan?" For some, religion may not come into play.

3. *"Call if you need anything."*

They aren't going to call. It is much better to offer something concrete, such as: "I have some free time, and if needed, I would like to come over and help where possible."

4. "He/she is in a better place now."

These clichés can be hurtful as circumstances may be of a sensitive and/or difficult nature.

5. "It's time to get on with your life."

We all grieve in our own way and our own time. It is not your place to suggest what length of grieving is warranted.

Stages of grief

We know now that there are five stages of grief that most individual tends to go through, but how those stages play out in a person's life will be unique and probably full of nuance, involving emotions that come and go, in a seemingly cyclical fashion.³

The five stages of grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

People experience grief in many different ways, often in a unique mix of sadness, shock, anger, fear, or anxiety. Some feel numb, while others feel relief or peace after a loss. Some can even feel removed from the world and disconnected from daily life, including work. In all of these cases, support is necessary to move on and forward.

In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain and allow yourself the opportunity to grieve. Unresolved grief can lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems. Exploring your feelings and thoughts through writing, painting, music, or other forms of creative expression can be a powerful way to help heal. And remember, crying is a natural way to help release the hurt.

Be aware that some coworkers may not have experienced a significant loss, and do not have the psychological tools or experience to support their peers. For them, it is vital to have an established plan for supporting their colleagues without becoming consumed by the situation.

How to move forward

Grieving a loss can sometimes feel endless and unbearable, and yet we eventually must return to some daily routines.

Although some of those routines may have changed, the need to work often remains constant. What happens then? Moving forward doesn't mean forgetting; it's merely making new connections so we can thrive. Being conscious of our distressing emotional thoughts can be the impetus to moving forward in our own lives, but how do we become the kind of support for a grieving colleague if and when required in their time of need?⁴

Through our work, we have found that employees have a dual responsibility. First is the responsibility to the employer; second is the responsibility to keep the work environment running like a healthy ecosystem, part of which is taking a reasonable amount of interest in the well-being of coworkers. Almost all of us will spend the better part of our working lives surrounded by people who are not considered to be our friends. While we may spend more time with them than with our family and/or social friends, the interactions are typically communal and on the surface, rarely run deep. Coworkers and supervisors are often at a loss as to how to react in the wake of a personal and significant loss. It's difficult to know what to do or say, what not to do or say, and how long the uneasiness will last.⁵

We form well-intentioned comments out of care and concern, yet may convey unknowingly a lack of sensitivity to one's grief experience. The bereaved may take this perceived reservation to mean that it's time to "snap out of" their sadness though they have little control over their emotions and may lack the ability to regulate their attention. Workers whose jobs take high concentration may experience distracting thoughts about the deceased and may make mistakes that they wouldn't typically make. Added to the intense emotions they are experiencing is anxiety about how employers and coworkers perceive them. A bereaved person may have a fear of further loss, of their job, perhaps compounding the sadness and anxiety they are already experiencing. These are two ways you can support a grieving colleague; it is wise to find a compassionate middle ground where supportive actions and giving space are in balance. While it may seem well-intentioned, saying, "take your time" or "whatever you need" may be insufficient and may result in an uncomfortable void between colleagues. Where existing relationships permit and while ensuring you respect the right to privacy, you may ask about the loss during the course of related conversations.

At the same time, it's essential to remain respectful and aware of when the conversation becomes uncomfortable and the person is giving verbal and non-verbal cues of their need to stop the conversation. Grief counsellors suggest phrasing it authentically. For example, "I don't know what to say, but I care, and I'm here when you want to talk."

Remember that grief isn't linear, and it can be quite complicated. Feelings, thoughts, reactions, and challenges related to this type of pain are very personal. These thoughts or feelings can sometimes seem at odds with each other, with the intensity of grief changing over time. On top of this, it is not uncommon to feel like the grieving has reached an end only to be derailed by an unexpected trigger. Holidays, for example, are known triggers because they hold so much emotion, nostalgia, memory, and familial pressure.

What can you do?

Different strategies can help you to learn to live more effectively with this experience.

1. First, do not try to speed up your mourning, or the mourning of those around you. It is normal to need time to accept the loss.
2. Do not hesitate to talk about your feelings or reactions with people who may be close to you. Ask them for help. If you talk about your feelings, you will likely recover faster from the loss.
3. Be attentive to others experiencing the same loss. In this way, you will benefit from mutual support and understanding.
4. Take care of your physical health. It is possible that your grief will cause stress and sickness. Consult your physician if you are worried about your health.
5. Take time to reflect on other losses that you have suffered. You will likely discover similarities. This should normalize what has happened, and give you hope.
6. Gradually resume your favorite activities, particularly those that energize you or 'recharge your batteries.' Develop new interests, make new friends.
7. The loss of someone close to you is a painful experience. It often leaves us in a state of helplessness or confusion. Remember: it takes time to learn to live with such an experience. Also remember that many resources are available, should you need help.
8. If necessary, do not hesitate to call us. A professional from your Assistance Program can help you through your mourning period.

We all work through grief at our own pace. A workplace with a thoughtful and easy to follow a plan for dealing with pain over loss is going to have the best chance of mitigating bereavement-related losses while avoiding having grieving become problematic and disruptive. ⁶

If you or someone you know have questions about grief and/or bereavement options, speak to your employer, or contact your Employee Family Assistance Program for the options available to you.

References:

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