

WHEN GRIEF COMES TO WORK

THE MANAGER'S ROLE AND RESPONSE

Numerous research studies and manager "how to" articles highlight how important immediate supervisors and managers are to the people who report to them. You are the face, the voice, and the heart of the company to your employees. This is especially true when an employee or a work group experiences grief.

Death and loss touch all of us, usually many times throughout our lives. Yet we may feel unprepared and uncomfortable when grief intrudes into our daily routines. The purpose of this article is to provide general information and knowledge about the grief process; give you some tools and suggestions for supporting a grieving employee; and, address the special needs of a work group when a co-worker dies.

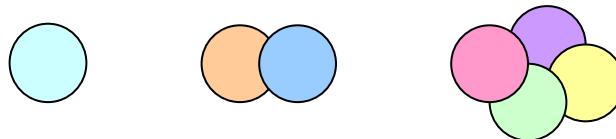
Elements of Grief

What do we need to know about grief and mourning? The most important fact is that we will each experience grief in our own way and on our own time schedule. Various researchers and theorists have identified four to 12 stages, phases, or tasks of mourning. J.W. Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning form a solid foundation for understanding grief work. The tasks are:

- 1) accept the reality of the loss,
- 2) experience and accept the emotions,
- 3) adjust to life without the loved one and
- 4) invest emotional energy into a new and different life.

All of these tasks will be accomplished to a greater or lesser degree while we go through our usual routines, including work.

Grieving is a complex process that is the natural and normal response to loss. It involves emotions, physical sensations, thoughts and behaviors. Imagine each of the thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviors associated with grief as overlapping circles that appear and disappear at random. Sometimes you are in a peaceful center while at other times you are in the center of a whirling tornado.



Several factors affect how a loss is experienced. Who died and what was your relationship to them determine the impact of a loss. The death of an acquaintance may be experienced differently than the death of a spouse or a child. The cause of death also impacts our grief. An "expected" death due to old age or medical condition is very different than a traumatic death by accident, murder or suicide. Grief has been likened to a physical wound. How we heal from a wound depends on the nature of the wound, the extent of the damage, the medical assistance or support available and the health of the wounded. Mourning, our healing time from grief's wound, is subject to the same criteria.

Emotions, physical symptoms, behaviors, and thoughts

Emotionally a bereaved person may feel many emotions or none at all. Commonly experienced emotions are sadness, anger, frustration, guilt, shock and numbness and sometimes relief. Frequently reported physical sensations include fatigue or weakness, shortness of breath, tightness in chest, dry mouth. Many men describe their feeling about loss in physical terms such as “stunned,” “punched in the gut”, and “crushed”. Some of the observable behaviors of grief are loss of appetite, insomnia, withdrawing socially, crying, dreams or nightmares, calling out the deceased’s name, and treasuring (or avoiding) mementos or memories of the deceased. Thoughts can be as repetitive as a gerbil on an exercise wheel or they can be “what if ____” or “if only ____” in nature. Some mourners will experience all of the above, some only a few. Some will have accomplished all four tasks by the end of the first year. Others may take many years to come to terms with their loss. Moving forward with your life does not mean forgetting the loved one.

Other experiences

The following are also frequently experienced by the bereaved. Hearing the voice or footsteps of the departed, or catching a glimpse of the loved one are common. These phenomena are the expression of our yearning for our loved one. Also common are feelings of spiritual emptiness or questioning of God or beliefs. Absentmindedness or preoccupation may cause you to be mistake or accident-prone. Be especially cautious with power tools, heavy equipment or driving. DO NOT engage in these activities while under the influence of your emotions.

Cultural influences on mourning

Every one of us is the composite product of many different cultures even if we have lived in the same place with the same people all of our lives. Mourning, the outward, external, public expression of grief is determined by those cultures. These cultural influences guide our choices about how long we should grieve, what rituals, if any, are practiced, what our expectations of others and ourselves are and what behaviors are deemed appropriate. The following are some of the more common cultures and how they influence mourning.

Gender socialization is one of the biggest cultural influences on grief behaviors. Much of the early research and study of grief was based on the experiences of women who are more likely to “tend and befriend” each other in times of sorrow. Talking with supportive companions who may cry with you or hold your hand is a typical feminine response. Men, with cultural imperatives to be strong and in control of their emotions, are more likely to seek privacy, maybe with a trusted buddy or out of doors, for emotional processing. They are more disposed to taking action, with a need to be in motion and doing something. – pacing, taking charge, washing the car, etc.

The above are very general behaviors and not all men and women will behave in these ways. Other cultural influences are religion, ethnic origins and affiliations, social class, educational background, geographic region, community or neighborhood, rural, urban or suburban. Each culture, or its absence, will contribute something to how an individual will mourn, how long they will mourn, and what expectations of themselves and others they will hold. As a manager you need to be aware of any cultural influences or differences that may impact your employees.

Manager's Role With A Bereaved Employee

Benefits of returning to work

Your primary role is creating a caring, supportive, professional environment regardless of the situation. A safe, predictable place is particularly important to a recently bereaved employee.

Remember there are benefits to returning to the work place. Some of those benefits are:

1. It is a known, safe, supportive environment.
2. It encourages the resumption of a regular daily routine. It provides a reason for getting out of bed and eating at mealtime.
3. It allows a person to focus on something besides grief and their loss. It may even allow them to feel "normal" for a while.
4. Self-esteem and confidence are built by the successful completion of work tasks.

Difficulties

At the same time there are difficulties experienced by many bereaved employees. Grieving takes a huge amount of emotional energy and some are overwhelmed if work is added on top of the grief.

They may need more time off than is usually allowed. Those who do return to work may be bothered by the symptoms of grief such as:

1. poor concentration or memory,
2. being tired or fatigued much of the time,
3. feeling depressed, sad or tearful at unpredictable times,
4. being irritable or short tempered,
5. feeling guilty about not being as productive or cheerful, or receiving "special treatment",
6. being on an emotional roller-coaster with ups and downs throughout the day – OK one hour and not OK the next.

As the manager it is important that you acknowledge the employee's loss with a culturally sensitive way such as a sympathy note or card, flowers, donation, etc. If possible attend the funeral, or send a representative. Stay in touch with your employee, even if there is a best friend or someone else coordinating contacts with him/her, you still need to touch base.

Developing a return to work plan: Necessary questions

You may be able to assist in developing a return to work plan. As you share and listen to your employee you can gather information about what will work best for a smooth transition back to work. Some of the questions you will need answered are:

- What are your company's policies and procedures for medical and bereavement leave? Learn about the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and how it applies to your company.
- What information do they want co-workers to have? Do they want to do the telling or do they want a spokesperson?
- Do they want to talk about their experience or do they want to focus on work or do they want to do both?

- Do they need private time at work or the ability to leave the work area if overcome with emotion?
- Do they need to temporarily adjust their work schedule or their workload?
- Do they need help with home life -- child care, meals, laundry, house work, transportation, understanding new finances – are there co-workers who would like to help?
- Who are the members of the natural healing groups in your work place? Enlist and encourage their participation.
- Are you prepared for other group members experiencing a grief reaction of their own triggered by their co-worker's grief?
- How can you continue to increase your knowledge and understanding of grief? Do you have access to additional training, readings, internet, etc.?

Keep asking these questions throughout the transition period. It may be a month, two months, six months, or a year. Each person's mourning time is his or her own and is different for each. Keep listening to the answers, they will change over time. Expect the best from your employee and accept less than the best for a while.

Helpful Responses For Managers And Co-Workers

- *Offer specific help.* Make meals, wash car, polish shoes, watch children, walk pets (feed and water), answer the phone, buy stamps, anything that will make your friend and co-worker's life a little easier and let's them know that you care.
- *Say something* about the death of the loved one. "I'm so sorry for your loss" is always appropriate. Share your feelings but don't compare your losses with theirs.
- *Listen* within the limits of your time, energy, and work load. Be kind but be honest – we all know when someone is not actively listening to us.
- *Respect privacy.* Honor closed doors and quiet moments.
- *Expect tears.*
- Be aware that others may react to grief with grief work of their own.
- Include the bereaved employee in social plans, even if you know they will decline. We all like to be asked and included. Sometimes a "good time" is just what is needed.
- Managers, *thank your staff* for all the extra work and effort.
- Support other co-workers' efforts to help. This could be a team building opportunity.
- Expect the best from grieving employees, and accept less than the best for a while.

Group Grief When A Co-Worker Dies

All of the above applies plus the following as you and all the work group are all affected when someone in the group dies. As with other deaths the impact is determined by how the death occurred as well as the relationship each of you had with the deceased. It will also affect the work routines.

- Call an informal meeting of the work group when you have been notified. Give the group whatever information you have and encourage talking about the feelings and that it is normal and natural to grieve. Talking about the deceased is often helpful. Allow natural healing groups to process the event and their concerns with each other and be available to respond to questions. Share your thoughts and feelings with group members.
- Attending the funeral can be a comfort to the family as well as a way of honoring the co-worker. If possible arrange for time off so that all the work group can attend if they wish.
- Encourage some kind of group remembrance such as a donation to a special charity or project, memorial bulletin board, memory book to be given to the surviving family, etc. Allow and encourage the friends and co-workers of the deceased to take the lead in planning and implementing the work group response.
- Be sensitive with personal effects. If the family wants to keep them, be sure to deliver them personally. If the family wants you to dispose of them, wait a few months before taking action, they may change their mind.
- Monitor the group's response to the person hired to fill the vacant position created by the death. Sometimes they receive the anger that has not been expressed by the remaining co-workers. Talk about this before the new hire's first day.

Remind your group that there are resources available to them if they are struggling with their grief. In the case of a sudden, traumatic death you may want to consult with your EAP about a group debriefing or defusing to give everyone a chance to process thoughts and feelings about the death. Your EAP is always available to you and your employees to consult about these issues. Other community resources include hospice programs that offer bereavement services, community mental health centers, private practice counselors, social workers and clergy of all faiths.

Additional information can be found on the internet at such sites as

<http://www.mutualofomaha.com/eap/resources.html/grief>
www.hospicenet.org
www.webhealing.com
www.willowgreen.com
www.griefdigest.com.

Grieving is a necessity, not a weakness. It is how we heal and move forward. Asking for help reflects your decision to work through the grief.

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