

Grief in the Workplace

Pandemic Adds Dimension to Mourning

Editor's note: *Grief is never an easy emotion to deal with even in the "best of times" and the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been anything but "normal." And so, while much of the content in this Brown Bagger would be applicable regardless of the circumstances, EAR has added content particularly pertinent during this challenging time.*

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. Grief goes hand in hand with loss, and the pandemic has added a dimension to the grieving process that normally does not exist.

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.

The Experience of "Jamie"

During her father's final days, *Jamie said, *"There's just no closure. I feel so helpless."* Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no funeral, no way to offer support to Jamie's mother in Florida, no way to put a period on her father's death.

Jamie's feelings echo those of so many others who have lost loved ones during COVID-19. *Grief, together with feelings of helpless and social distancing, are changing the therapeutic landscape.*

*Deanna, who also lost her spouse *Doug to the pandemic, recalled his passing with one word – *unbelievable*. Now home and slowly recovering, she is trying to figure out who can safely attend the funeral and how to honor her spouse in the most meaningful way allowed by social distancing.

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Other Forms of Grief and Loss

But even if we haven't lost a loved one to COVID-19, it's important to note that ALL OF US have experienced grief and loss during this challenging time. The "loss" of the workplace environment as we

knew it. The “loss” of weddings, graduations, and other family milestones that have been either cancelled or postponed. And so on.

As human beings, we are creatures of habit and social connectedness. We look forward to going to the summer cottage each July. The county or state fair every August. The wedding of a best friend’s daughter in September. Take events like these away, and it’s like a piece of ourselves has been ripped away, too.

Events like these, while perhaps not as significant as the loss of a human life, are equally important to consider as we address the stressors employees and employers have been dealing with as they return to the workplace. Even casual interactions, such as in the lunchroom, or at a company picnic, may be gone forever – or at least for a long time. Due to the pandemic, there will be some sort of loss that will impact each and every one of us, and it’s important for EA professionals, employees, and employers alike to keep that in mind in the coming months.

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 or other loved one. They report 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. And FEAR of the unknown is an emotion that we likely have ALL experienced in light of the pandemic.*

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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 can no 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 hits 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?”*

Everyone grieves differently and that’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.

Summary

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 agreed to disagree, and I respected him.

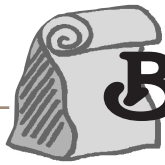
Some employees want to be left alone. An employee told me that he did not want anyone mentioning his loved one. He wanted to continue to work as if nothing happened. This employee later revealed that if he had let his emotions take over him, he would not be able to work.

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.**

(Editor’s note:** I can completely relate to this statement. Some former workmates of mine were very surprised that I was able to return to work two days after my father’s funeral. To me, work marked *some* return to normalcy that I desperately needed. Moping around at home would have only made things worse. But THAT’S ME. Some people could not have done that.)

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.) ■

Sources: Rosie Mendez, a licensed professional counselor (LPC) and licensed chemical dependency counselor (LCDC) with over 30 years’ grief counseling experience; and Ronne Rabinowitz, a psychotherapist, certified professional coach, and addictions specialist in private practice in Plainview, NY.



Grieving is Different for Each and Every Person

While certainly a professionally trained counselor will be able to offer areas of expertise that the average person could not, you don't necessarily have to be an EAP practitioner or another trained clinician to be able to help a co-worker who is grieving. The following are some suggestions.

What to do or say:

- Acknowledge the person's loss.
- 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. ■

Source: Rosie Mendez, a licensed professional counselor (LPC) and licensed chemical dependency counselor (LCDC) with over 30 years' grief counseling experience.