

Grief in the Workplace

By Kate R. Casey, M.C., LMHC

I was asked to write this article because, as a volunteer at Evergreen Hospice, I have had many experiences with people who are grieving. One of the tasks I do at Hospice is bereavement calling. If a family or friend has had someone die while receiving hospice care, with their permission we will call them monthly for up to 13 months after the death. I was making my calls one day when I happened to reach someone who was grateful for the timing of my call. He told me his boss had come to him the day before and told him he needed to get help because he wasn't fulfilling his job responsibilities. His wife had died 3 months before and she had been sick for quite a while before that.

The man on the phone was wondering what HE was doing wrong because he just "couldn't get it together and it had been 3 months and why aren't I coping better?" On top of this, he had 2 children that were also not coping well with the loss of their mother. Fortunately, this person was desperate enough to listen to what I suggested he do. Get professional support for himself and his children so they could process their grief together and individually, let his boss know that he needed more time off than the 2 weeks he had allocated for bereavement, and to let himself feel the loss of his wife and try to process all the changes that he and his children were facing, as a result of their loss.

American society is such a diverse and complex mixture of people, culture, and customs that we have very few shared rituals and more importantly, shared knowledge about the grief process. Most of us expect to pick up the pieces rather quickly after experiencing significant losses such as; death, divorce, chronic and life-threatening illnesses, family moves, and separation from familiar communities. I recently went to the funeral of a woman who had been very ill with cancer for a year before she died, leaving behind her husband and two children. When I sent an email of support to her husband after the woman's death, his office auto reply stated he was out of the office for the week and would be back in the following Monday. What that implies is that he will be back after 7 days as a fully functioning member of the work force at his company. He will leave his grief at home and maintain his standard of competency in the work place. For some that may seem acceptable; to me it's not acceptable at all. While there is no set time frame for the grief process I know it doesn't fit within a 1 week period of time.

Myths about Grief

Myth1. We only grieve deaths

Reality. We grieve all losses

Myth 2. Only family members grieve.

Reality. All those who are attached grieve.

Myth 3. Grief is an emotional reaction.

Reality. Grief is manifested in many ways.

Myth 4. An individual should leave grieving at home.

Reality. We cannot control where we grieve.

Myth 5. We slowly and predictably recover from grief.

Reality. Grief is an uneven process, a roller coaster with no timeline.

Myth 6. Grieving means letting go of the person who has died.

Reality. We never fully detach.

Myth 7. Grief finally ends.

Reality. Over time most people learn to live with loss.

Myth 8. Grievers are best left alone.

Reality. Grievers need opportunities to share their memories and grief, and to receive Support.

-Hospice Foundation of America

What this means is that the work place must make room for the employee or employer who is returning to work and still feeling vulnerable and shell-shocked from the recent events. They may want to return to a familiar routine as a way to feel back in control of their lives, but griever's need to understand that they will need to make time for processing feelings, thoughts, memories, regrets, resentments, bodily aches and pains, and eventually, a re-birth of sorts, even if it requires that meetings get rescheduled, work loads reshuffled, and the routine shaken. The following is one definition of grief.

Grief: The process of psychological, social, and somatic reactions to the perception of loss. This implies that grief is:

- a. Manifested in each of the psychological, social, and somatic realms
- b. A continuing development involving many changes
- c. A natural, expectable reaction
- d. The reaction to the experience of many kinds of loss, not necessarily death alone
- e. Based upon the unique, individualistic perception of loss by the griever, that is, it is not necessary to have the loss recognized or validated by others for the person to experience grief.

-Theresa A. Rando, Grief, Dying and Death

Often what happens when we are confronted with someone who has experienced a loss is that we don't know what to say or how to be with that person. We are uncomfortable with the prospect that, "that could have been me whose wife, husband, mother, father, child, has died and I don't want to think or feel about that". So we don't say anything or we avoid that person or we act as if it is business as usual. When my granddaughter was in elementary school the wife of one of the teachers was scheduled to have surgery to remove a brain tumor. They were also parents of a 6 month old baby. The night before she was to have surgery she died. The entire school and community were distraught about this teacher's loss and wondered whether he would return to teaching at the school. My granddaughter said to me, "I

feel so sad for Mr. _____ because he was always so happy and such a good teacher and now he won't be able to laugh again and he won't want to teach. I don't know if I want to even see him again because I don't know what to say to him.” I told my granddaughter, that even though this was a terrible loss for this teacher, that Mr. _____ would one day laugh again and that he would return to teaching because it had always meant so much to him and to his wife and that there would be people that would help him raise his daughter. I told her that when he did return to the school she could simply say, “Mr. _____ it's good to see you!” Smile and keep walking. He did return after a long time and he did laugh again. He continues to be an excellent teacher both in the classroom and as an example to the students and the community of what it means to grieve **and** continue on.

What do you do when you work with someone who is grieving whether it is a fellow worker or an employer? Ask them specifically how they are doing and then listen. Tell them you are sad for their loss, or their impending loss (there is such a thing as anticipatory grieving) and that words don't seem to express what it must be like and then listen. Let them know if they need to take their time with a task or project that it is acceptable to do that. Don't preach or look for “a bright side” to cover up your own discomfort. Listen. If, as in the case of the man at the beginning of this article, you see your employee or fellow worker struggling, remind them that there is help through; human resources, if you have that available in your business, or remind them that there are professionals in the community such as bereavement counselors, licensed mental health counselors, psychologists, social workers and spiritual advisors. Listen. And remember, each person has their own way of grieving. One person might want to talk about it while another may not say a word. Don't decide how someone is ‘supposed’ to be grieving. Allow for the differences.

“Grief and pain are the price we humans have to pay for the love and total commitment we have for another person. The more we love, the more we are hurt when we lose the object of our love. But if we are honest with ourselves, would we have it any other way?”

-C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

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