



Workplace Loss

Supporting staff during times of loss

Workplace Loss

Grief is complex and is not only experienced emotionally but affects us physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Because grief is experienced with our whole being, it is not possible to turn it on and off and relegate it to time outside of our jobs. It cannot be separated from the workplace.

A healthy workplace with empowered employees can only exist if grief and healing are fully respected and supported.

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Helping a Co-Worker who is Grieving

We live in a death denying society. It is often difficult for us to talk about death, especially with a relative stranger. In the workplace, however, it is very important to address the issues of the person's loss.

Ask about the loss. It is important that you take the initiative to talk about what happened. The griever will often keep what happened to themselves because they don't know who will be comfortable in talking about their loss. Ask them what happened and just sit back and **LISTEN**.

Listen. In the workplace, we tend to be problem-solvers. Something happens and we work together to fix it. In the instance of loss through death, no one can fix it. If you spend your time giving advice or offering judgments to the griever, you will not be listening. Part of the process of grieving is telling the story. This is how grievers heal and make sense of the loss. If you are talking more than you are listening, you are not being there for them.

The need for time off. Help to negotiate time off during the first year if they request it. Again, it is difficult for grievers to initiate having their needs met. This will be especially difficult for them if they are very dependent on the job for their on-going survival. If possible, allow for periods of time off, especially at the anniversary of the death, or the birthday if it is requested.

Help with the workload. A griever often will have difficulty with concentration, memory, and attention to details. They may be easily distracted and cry often. Needing to rearrange work load and share responsibilities will usually be temporary. Perhaps you can help with that.

Share resources. There are many good books available in recognized book stores and libraries about the grief process and grieving. There are also organizations and counselors available in your community that will support people who are grieving. Providing this information to your co-worker will be beneficial to them.

Misconceptions about Grief at Work

Grief and mourning are the same thing.

Grief is what the griever feels on the inside. Mourning is the expression of those thoughts and feelings. Everyone grieves when someone loved dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

We only grieve and mourn the specific loss.

When someone we love dies, we not only mourn the loss of the physical presence of that person, but we also mourn other losses caused by the death, such as loss of security, loss of meaning in our lives, loss of part of who we are, etc.

Grief is an emotional response.

Grief affects our whole beings. So grief is not only an emotional response. It also affects us physically, cognitively, socially and spiritually.

Grief and mourning progress in predictable, orderly stages.

Grief is not predictable nor is it orderly. Grief occurs in a wave-like, non-sequential fashion.

Grief work should be done at home, in private.

It is impossible to turn emotions on and off and relegate them to home. We need to find ways to support grief in the workplace.

When grief and mourning are finally reconciled, they never come up again.

Grief never truly ends. We will always miss the people who have died and we will experience "grief bursts" now and then for the rest of our lives.

Only direct family members of the person who died grieve.

When someone we care about dies we grieve and we need to mourn, whether the person was a family member or not. The more deeply attached we were to the person who died, the more deep our grief will likely be.

Nobody, coworkers and employers included, can help you with your grief.
The support of compassionate friends, coworkers and employers can and does make a significant difference.

Adapted from Healing Grief At Work, Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D 2005

Loss, Grief & Healing in the Workplace

Loss is a normal part of life and when there is loss we grieve. We grieve when our loved ones die. We also grieve other losses: illness, divorce, family discord, financial difficulties and the many disappointments that touch our lives.

In a large organization with many employees, grief is not an exception but the norm. People who are grieving have a reduced ability to concentrate in the days, weeks and months after a death or major loss. Powerful emotions well up repeatedly, overtaking the mind's capacity to think clearly and logically making it hard to complete tasks.

Consider these wider implications:

- Employees who can't concentrate tend to make bad decisions.
- Mourners in supervisory positions impact everyone they supervise.
- Unsafe work behaviours may be the most visible and thus measurable result of mourners decreased capacity to concentrate.
- Of the ten leading causes of workplace injuries resulting in workers missing five or more days of work, seven are the direct result of a reduced ability to concentrate. Fully 50% of blue collar workers affected by a death reported a higher incidence of injury in the days and weeks after the death.

"Presenteeism" - employees at work but unable to function to capacity - costs US companies more than \$150 billion a year, much more than "absenteeism" at \$30 billion a year.

The grieving employee at work is struggling valiantly to do his job as expected, but his body, mind and spirit keep pushing his normal and necessary grief to the surface. So he's there but he's not there. The question is how can we help?

The first step in creating a compassionate work environment is to acknowledge that grief is an issue. The next is to put practices in place that will support employees when difficult times arise for them.

A growing body of research shows when organizations put people first, their performance on almost all indicators is better. If employees are cared for when they're vulnerable, it makes it possible for them to move on more quickly and become productive again.

Research has been done to trace the forms of compassion at work and to map its consequences. The most common forms of compassion at work include providing emotional support, allowing for flexibility with work time, and offering material support that is both helpful and symbolic of concern – flowers, cards, and meals, to name a few.

The experience of compassion changes the way people think about themselves and the way they see their coworkers - compassion builds bonds between people. Experiencing compassion at work can also change the way people see the entire organization as a more caring place. It heightens positive emotions, supports employee engagement and inspires organizational commitment.

What Can We Do?

The first step on the road to creating a grief-friendly work environment is to acknowledge that it's an issue. The second step is to put policies in place that support the grieving employee. The policy goal should be to create a culture of compassion - what is needed is compassion reform.

Bereavement leave - What is your organization's bereavement leave policy? A typical bereavement leave allows three days off for the death of an immediate family member. This isn't enough. A full work week's leave is much more realistic and enabling for the employee. Easily accessed unpaid leave is another option. Moreover, it's important that your bereavement leave policy allow for absences due to deaths outside the immediate family.

Management practices - How do you respond when an employee is affected by death? As with all aspects of corporate culture, management is responsible for modeling the desired behaviour. Set up grief support training sessions for your management team.

Workplace Counselling - Your Employment Assistance Program should be able to help you set up individual counseling for mourners as well as workplace grief groups. Also seek out appropriate referral sources to provide support to your employees, such as hospice bereavement support.

Workplace Education - Employees need to be educated about your new culture of compassion. Ongoing grief education needs to be provided.

Stress Relief - Policies and culture shifts aimed at relieving stress in the workplace will be good for the grieving employee, too. Environmental considerations and wellness programs, such as yoga or meditation, can go a long way towards creating a comfortable, peaceful space in which to work - and grieve.

Flexibility – Above all when it comes to grief at work, encourage flexibility: alternative work arrangements, compressed work weeks, job sharing, telecommuting, and other work-life program initiatives.

Creative Programs - Look into programs that other enlightened employers use to support grieving people and adapt them to your workplace. They are out there!

Adapted from Healing Grief At Work, Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D 2005

Guidelines for Workplace Loss

These Guidelines for Workplace Loss were developed by Hospice Yukon for our Loss, Grief and Healing Workshops for managers. They provide a template to turn to when losses occur in the workplace.

The foundation of the guidelines is in creating a compassionate workplace that supports all losses as they arise. The circle model demonstrates how this foundation is essential to supporting the grieving employee as well as responding to both the crisis of sudden death and the losses from long term illnesses.

Foundation – The Compassionate Workplace

Choose items appropriate for individual workplace situations

Include 'compassion' as a workplace value and implement it at all levels.

Integrate the language of compassion in the workplace (empathy, responsiveness, easing suffering, deep listening, etc.).

Identify and train a workplace compassion or wellness team – this can be as small as two people.

Include relationship and team-building as part of the culture.

Allow a reasonable time for conversation during times of crisis or grief at work.

Be open to and respectful of individual definitions of grief (e.g. to some the death of a pet is devastating).

Be open to and respectful of individual coping mechanisms for grief (e.g. for some work is integral to dealing with loss, others need time off).

Ensure that managers and supervisors are given training as well as the flexibility to deal with individual situations.

Add 'Loss and Grief' workshops to leadership development programs.

Become familiar with the process of grief and help educate employees by providing access to brochures or materials.

Determine your workplace's scope of flexibility by brainstorming potential scenarios as a management team.

Understand the collective agreement provisions, programs, and supports available. Have this list readily available in writing and communicated to staff (on bulletin boards, in HR, etc).

Be aware of what community services are available (e.g. Hospice Yukon, Yukon Mental Health Association, etc).

Develop general confidentiality protocols and mechanisms for communicating in each situation.

Educate staff on the difference between 'equal treatment' (treating everyone the same) and 'equitable treatment' (treating each individual situation fairly).

Supporting Your Grieving Employee

Choose items appropriate for individual workplace situations

At the Time of Loss:

Purchase or create an appropriate card, write a personal message, and pass it around the office.

Send flowers or other culturally suitable gestures of care.

Attend memorial services.

Have clear funeral or leave policies for the employee and coworkers.

Encourage the employee to get support through counselling, bereavement support groups or from clergy members.

Work with the bereaved employee to renegotiate work expectations and set up regular times to check in on progress - provide ongoing structure and support.

Offer the option to shift to flexible hours or telecommute. Some employees who have suffered complicated losses may need to work half time, job share or take a leave of absence. Be flexible! Be creative!

Hold a meeting with the entire workgroup to brainstorm ways to help. (i.e. frozen meals, pet walking, checking in at 3 months/ 6 months.)

Always respect the confidential nature of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others.

As tasks are re-distributed, be sure to thank the employees dealing with the additional work for their efforts.

If for some reason you are not able to carry out these jobs, find someone on staff who is a good fit for coordinating support.

When the Employee Returns to Work:

For your employee who has not yet returned to work, stay in touch. Co-workers may remain in contact, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.

Schedule a pre-return meeting. Talking with the employee before they return to work will help ease re-entry. Ask how the employee is doing and listen (meeting can be in office or out as appropriate to individual).

Before your employee comes back to work, ask how you can help. Some questions you might consider with your returning employee include:

Would you like me or another person to share any information with the others? What would you like them to know?

What is confidential?

Do you want to talk about your experience when you return, or would you prefer to concentrate on the work?

Do you prefer email, phone or one on one conversation?

Are you aware of any special needs at this time? Privacy? Initial reduced work hours? Help to catch up on your work?

The answers to these questions may change on a daily basis. Employee emotions are not yet stable. Keep asking the questions and listen to your employee's response.

Let the person grieve in their own way. If the person finds working to be therapeutic, do not lighten the workload. If the grieving person is slow to move back into work, try to ease their workload.

Accept that the grieving person's moods may be changeable for some time. It helps to be aware that intense feelings, which are beyond the person's control, can arise at any time.

Expect tears, frustrations, impatience. They are a normal part of the grieving process.

Avoid being judgmental of how the co-worker grieves. Some people may become numb and the grieving process is delayed for weeks or even months after the death.

You may also need to set limits. Listening may be difficult for you at any given time for various reasons. Acknowledge what they are saying is important, but listening is difficult right now. Schedule the conversation for another time.

At times, appropriate touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone. If you are comfortable and you know your employee is comfortable, a simple hand on their shoulder can mean a lot.

Remember holidays and anniversaries can be especially difficult. Ask what you can do to provide extra support during these times. Mark the anniversary on your calendar and send a card.

Talk to your employee's peers, ask for their support, encourage their thoughtfulness, reassure them, ask for their ideas on supporting both the bereaved and peers, and talk about workload and safety.

Always listen, listen, listen.

It is the single most important support you can provide.

How soon & how well people experience "re-entry" is directly related to the relationship with their workplace.

Crises: Sudden Death Due to Accident or Illness

Choose items appropriate for individual workplace situations

Make the office a safe space where staff feel welcomed to come together to grieve and support one another.

Upon notification of the death of an employee (may need to confirm with RCMP) bring together the support team: manager, HR rep, staff member.

Have peer support in place to help supervisors deal with crises.

Pull together employees most affected by the loss into a safe place to tell them first (may involve bringing in RCMP).

- Consider supporting smaller groups rather than one large group.
- Have emergency contacts for when staff are away and emergency contact numbers for partners.
- Have EAP support on hand, if possible.

Close the office, if possible, on the day of notification. Contact other branch offices and invite them to do the same.

Put signs up explaining the office closure without stating specifics.

Give staff the option to stay or leave.

- If people want to stay, offer tasks.

- New employees who are not as impacted by the loss may agree to fill in for time-sensitive work.

- Borrow staff from another department.

- Close office for funeral, meet at work and go to service together.

Cancel meetings and forward all phones to one location.

Respond to all emails personally – including those responding to a group message.

Create a contact list of who needs to be notified of the death.

- Call all offices.

- Consider “telephone tree”.

- If death occurs at work, know who needs to be notified?

Call family (offer condolence and assistance).

- Invite family into office.

Organize flowers, card and meals for family.
Stay in touch (offer to assist with funeral service).

Create a mourning space at the office for photos, flowers, mementos, notes.

Invite staff to write in a memory book for the family.

Are discretionary funds available? Consider:

- Flowers for the office
- Printing pictures of the person
- Coffee / food for staff
- Candles

Do not rearrange the deceased's office – except with their staff or co-workers.
Instead bring in pictures and flowers as a memorial.

Offer counselling options (EAP, Hospice, grief resource package, etc).

Talk to board members with plan.

Allow staff as much control over their priorities as possible.

Encourage use of vacation time and mental health days and reduce over time.

Ad in the paper.

Gather info for family:

- From HR and insurance people
- Death benefits
- Insurance, holiday pay accrued, etc.
- Sample of deceased's work for family

Ideas for memorials:

- Garden
- Food bank
- Web site
- Include in annual report
- Establish memorial fund
- Fundraising for family
- Acknowledge anniversaries

Offer support to bereaved staff members more than once.

It is never too late to acknowledge loss.

Long Term: Living with Serious or Life Threatening Illness

Choose items appropriate for individual workplace situations

Pull together a team to assess situation and address different needs: psycho-social, job related, practical support for employee and family.

Make sure staff knows who these designated leaders are.

Communication plan for information coming in and going out of office:

- Request being informed by family when the death has occurred
- Respect confidentiality – assess need to know

Identify needs on a timeline: immediate, one week, one month, six months.

Job - Consider alternative work arrangements

- borrowing from another department
- finding less stressful tasks, if employee is able to work.
- consider flexible hours / job sharing / working at home
- Explore leave options & pay options
- Develop individualized return to work plan

Supporting family builds community. Give staff the opportunity to help with:

- making meals

- driving

- errands and shopping

- household maintenance

Fundraising

- Include family

Be aware of 'survivor exhaustion' and 'compassion fatigue'. Illness and death is stressful for everyone involved. Continue to encourage self-care with staff, especially with those in supportive roles.



Compassionate end-of-life and grief support for Yukoners

Hospice Yukon offers grief support for individuals and families, including children and teens. Our services include counselling (in person, by telephone, or online), Healing Touch, a variety of grief groups, educational workshops, and a lending library. Please contact us for information about current offerings.

Hospice Yukon is open

Monday to Friday

11:30am - 3:00pm

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