



GRIEF AT WORK

Grief is the normal and natural response to loss, a universal human experience. Every workplace must deal with complex emotional issues. The more difficult emotions, like grief, can disturb workers and diminish the work environment. Colleagues want to do the right thing, but are not sure how to do it. Meanwhile, managers and employees may feel pressured and anxious, knowing the work must still get done. It's no wonder that we need help in working through grief.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO GRIEVE?

Grief is experienced on many levels. We know that grief can be responsible for physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, fatigue or actual illness. Grief affects the way our minds work. Our ability to concentrate and to remember may diminish. During times of loss, grief is the filter through which we receive information and make decisions.

Clearly, grief affects our feelings. Almost all emotions can be part of a grief reaction, and they may be experienced with dizzying speed and intensity. Fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of our grief. There is no order or scale by which to measure these emotions. There is no time limit on grief.

If faith is a part of our lives, it can be a source of comfort as we grieve. But we may also question how this loss fits with our understanding of God. It may feel like God has forgotten us or is not there at all. When we need it most, we may struggle with what we have believed for a long time. Our religious mentors tell us the process of questioning and struggling is an inherent conflict and that those who work through can be rewarded with an increased faith.

While we wade through these thoughts and feelings, we must also cope with the world outside. We may feel angry that the world won't slow down for a moment, that it doesn't even seem to take notice of this awesome event in our lives. It might bother us when we see others enjoying life.

It hurts when others don't mention the loss - and sometimes it hurts when they do. We need some time alone to get our bearings. We may wish to regain our identity by resuming our routine, or even plunge into activities that keep us too busy to feel.

It's easy to see why grieving people wonder if they are normal. Our understanding of grief is limited, and each human being is very different. There's no right way to grieve, and no short cut around it. Grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on.

Grief may never entirely go away, but it will change. And we change, too; we are never quite the same again. We can find new ways of feeling, working, and believing. The loss and its meaning become part of life, and this new life can be healthy and happy.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THOSE WHO GRIEVE

You now have *two* jobs. You have responsibilities to your employer, and your job is important to you. But the work of grief is just as important. It can't be put aside or ignored - the only way past grief is to move *through* it. Grief is hard work and, at times, is lonely work, but you can find comfort and guidance along the way.

- Don't expect too much of yourself for a while. Give yourself a break.
- Take control of seemingly small things: who to be with, when to write a letter, what to put off until later. When life seems out of control, we begin to reclaim it a little at a time.
- Important items can wait. The grieving period is no time to make big decisions, like selling a home or switching jobs. Give yourself time before you make any changes that will alter the rest of your life.
- Time is your friend. Make sure that you take time to rest, to be with people who support you, and to be alone with your thoughts.
- Decide that you will survive intense emotions. Don't turn away from painful sadness or anger because you are afraid of "losing it." Locate a quiet place and let yourself go; you will be able to get it back together again.
- Pay special attention to your needs during holiday seasons or important anniversaries (i.e. birthdays, anniversary of the death, etc.). Just when you're beginning to feel better, your grief feelings may come flooding back. Honor your memories and acknowledge the loss with traditions that recall happy moments. Be sure to make time to remember.
- Don't isolate yourself. While time alone can be helpful, the support of others is an important part of the healing process.
- Don't drink or take drugs. While doing so may temporarily mask feelings, they do not help you move through them. Further, continuing use may cause other problems.

- Find at least one good listener so you can tell your story. This is an important part of the healing work of grief. Listening is the best gift anyone can give you.
- Expect that people won't always say the right thing (if there is a right thing). They may be as inexperienced at offering help as you are at grieving. Accept that they mean well.
- Your loss may remind others of their own losses. Some people may become tearful or may want to share their stories with you. Listening to them may bring you comfort, but if it's more than you can bear, say so.
- If spiritual values and traditions have been meaningful to you, speak with a clergy member or friend who shares your beliefs. Make room for your faith to be part of the grieving process.
- It may be helpful to speak with a counselor. Your Employee Assistance Program is available to you. Simply call **1 (800) 828-6025** weekdays between 9AM - 5PM, Eastern Time to set up an appointment. In an emergency or crisis, call anytime. A counselor is always available.

*"Give sorrow words.
The grief that does not speak
knits up the overwrought heart
and bids it to break."*

Shakespeare

[Much of the material used in this handout comes from "Grief at Work: A Guide for Employees and Managers, published by American Hospice Foundation, 1995.]

**For Confidential, Free Assistance
Call Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
For appointments, call: 1-800-828-6025
between 8:30 AM and 7:00 PM EST Monday through Thursday,
or between 8:30 AM and 5:00 PM Friday.
In case of emergency or crisis, call anytime.**

