

## Palette of Grief®

### *The Art of Coping with Loss in the Workplace*

By Barbara Rubel

**A**lthough death is a fact of life, we live in a death-denying society and few people want to talk about it, let alone deal with it. But it's crucial to acknowledge grief since it can extend into the workplace long after the death has occurred.

Whether death is expected or not, employees may find it difficult to cope with their grief. Managers need to be compassionate and understanding as they help employees balance their grief with workplace demands. Learning about the impact of grief on the body and mind gives employers a better understanding of how to help bereaved employees. The goal of this article is to offer suggestions in supporting employers, managers, co-workers, and bereaved employees.

#### **What are They Going Through?**

To better understand how to help grieving employees, you need to focus on what they are going through. Typically, reactions are described as a *journey of grief*, feeling as though they are in *quicksand*, in a *storm*, or trapped in a *spider's web*. Individuals have also described their grief as the *process of glass becoming sand on the beach*. I have developed the *Palette of Grief®*, which is a metaphor that captures the blending of physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual reactions after a loss.

#### **Physical Reactions**

Although grief is a unique process, there are common physical symptoms, such as:

- Sensitivity to noise;
- Changes in appetite;
- Headaches;
- Dry mouth;
- Neck and shoulder pain;
- Tightness in the chest;
- Increase in colds;
- Exhaustion;
- Temporary slowing of reactions;

- Muscular aches;
- Rashes;
- Breathlessness; and
- Tension.

Other reactions may include exaggeration of allergies, bowel and bladder disturbances, hollowness in stomach, ulcers, nausea, and sleep disturbances.

#### **Emotional Reactions**

Physical reactions may occur simultaneously with emotional responses such as shock, numbness, sadness, fear, loneliness, apathy, crying, anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, rejection, jealousy, pining, yearning, and anger. Individuals may experience loss of control, self-blame, and powerlessness. It is not uncommon to experience guilt and shame in certain types of deaths.

#### **Cognitive Reactions**

Cognitive reactions to grief may also occur concurrently, such as an inability to concentrate, disorientation, dreams, and nightmares. If employees are not able to sleep, work performance may suffer. Grieving workers may be obsessive in their thinking, and overly critical of their actions. The bereaved may attempt to avoid reminders of loss, may not want to think about the deceased, or may continually review circumstances of the death to co-workers.

#### **Behavioral Reactions**

The bereaved do not grieve by neatly going through one stage to the next or experiencing one physical or emotional reaction at a time. Rather, physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions typically occur all at once. Behavioral changes can bring about withdrawal from friends, family, and co-workers. The bereaved may also:

- Become aggressive;
- Hoard items;

- Increase use of alcohol or other drugs;
- Become hyperactive, such as talking non-stop; and
- Crying unexpectedly.

Many grieving individuals also experience searching, in which they look for their loved ones in a crowd or experience an event that reminds them of their special persons. Such “triggers” are difficult to deal with, and when one occurs, employees may be inconsolable.

### Spiritual Reactions

Lastly, spiritual reactions, among others, include feeling empty and questioning the reason for living, and for dying. Spiritual reactions may revolve around hope. For some bereaved persons, there is no hope, while for others hope springs eternal. The individual may search for the meaning and purpose of his/her own life.

### Determinants of Grief

To determine why employees grieve in a certain way, the employee assistance professional needs to shift the focus from understanding how grief reactions interact to determining the causes of grief. Factors that influence the grief process include previous losses, personality, self-esteem, coping skills, and history of mental illness and depression. Individuals are unique, and the way they grieve is based on their relationships, backgrounds, age, religion, culture, and other reasons.

A significant determinant of grief is whether the death was anticipated or unexpected. Sudden, violent death can complicate the grief process. The following tips provide employee assistance professionals and management with some ideas to help bereaved staff:

#### *Tips for Supervisors and Managers:*

1. Understand the *Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)* and create/update corporate bereavement policy and distribute it to all managers.
2. Utilize employee assistance programs.
3. Disclose information about the death to staff based on grieving employee’s wishes.

4. Arrange for a company meeting to allow employees to share their feelings.
5. Contact bereaved employee as soon as possible to express condolences.
6. Ask about funeral arrangements and if any staff will be attending funeral or memorial service.
7. Choose someone to serve as a family liaison to organize company’s expression of sympathy. Depending on the culture, send individual cards or a single card signed by staff, in addition to flowers, food tray, fruit basket, or money for a charitable donation.
8. Work with manager to provide flexible work hours for bereaved employee. Redistribute workload if necessary, but express appreciation for any extra work co-workers take on.

#### *When an Employee has Died:*

- Designate an employee to clean out employee workstation.
- Place flowers on desk for a designated period of time.
- Contact next of kin to retrieve personal items.
- Create an office memory book for the employee’s family.
- Bring in a grief counselor or crisis team to talk with staff.

#### *Tips for Comforting a Bereaved Co-Worker:*

Comforting a co-worker is not easy. Pay close attention to your own prejudices about certain types of death and the way people are supposed to react after a loss. There is no one-size-fits-all grief response. Be mindful of your own feelings as you offer support.

1. Expect a range of grief emotions from tears and sadness to no reaction at all.
2. Listen to your colleague as he or she shares what happened again and again.
3. Respect an employee’s privacy if he or she does not want to talk about what happened.
4. Offer specific assistance such as cooking a meal or helping with shopping.
5. Include the co-worker in social plans and let him or her decide whether to accept or decline the invitation.
6. Recognize a co-worker’s reduced job performance for a while.



7. Avoid being judgmental of how the co-worker grieves.
8. Remind the bereaved to find ways to cope that don't include alcohol and illegal drugs.
9. Share if you have suffered a similar loss, but keep your story short and focus on the co-worker's grief.
10. Center on your co-worker's beliefs and not your own.

## What to Say When You Don't Know What to Say

Don't worry if you don't know what to say. Simply say, "I'm sorry." The fact that you are acknowledging the loss means a lot. Do the best you can and know that your condolences are appreciated. If the bereaved employee wants to discuss their loss, ask them what they are doing at home that brings comfort. Listen as they share their ways of coping with the death of their loved one. Questions you may ask could include:

- Do you have something that belonged to your loved one that brings you comfort?
- Have you thought about writing in a journal?
- Do you think that a special place with pictures of your loved one (e.g. shrine) is something that might help you through this difficult time?
- Have you created any rituals that bring you comfort?
- Have you thought about joining a bereavement support group?
- Even though your loved one is dead, do you think you can continue the connection you shared?

## When You Suffer a Significant Loss

When someone close to you dies, not only do you have to cope with the death, you must also adjust to returning to work afterward. You may find it difficult to resume a regular daily routine. Co-workers may mean well, but they might not know what to say or they might say the wrong thing. Not everyone is comfortable talking about death.

Talk to a supportive co-worker who wants to listen to your story. Focus on completing work projects and tasks. Although your productivity

may decline, do what you can as work will take your mind off your loss at times throughout the day.

Although you may worry about developing a reputation for wasting time, taking too much sick leave or being in a bad mood, most employers will help you transition back to work. Speak with your employer about temporarily modifying your workload. Keep thinking, "Don't resign...Grief takes time."

## Assisting a Grieving Child

As bereaved employees attempt to focus on work, they are often worried about their grieving children and find it hard to concentrate, which affects productivity. Employee assistance professionals can help employees become less stressed in the workplace by helping them with their concerns about their children.

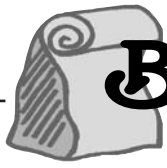
The ideas on page 4 are adapted from my book, *But I Didn't Say Goodbye: Helping Children and Families After a Suicide*, which identifies questions and activities bereaved employees can share at home with their children.

## Summary

When employers understand the grief process and what bereaved employees are going through, they are better able to be compassionate and understanding. In addition, when employees are aware of how grief affects the entire family, they are better able to assist them — especially their children.

Everyone involved in the person's loss — whether directly or indirectly — needs to recognize that grief is a normal process that does not stay at home when employees return to the workplace. It is important to create a compassionate atmosphere that is sympathetic and respects their right to grieve at home and in the workplace. ■

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## Questions to Ask a Grieving Child

- ✓ Has someone said or done something that reminded you of the person who died? If so, explain what it was.
- ✓ If you could have one item that belonged to the person who died, what would it be?
- ✓ Why does the object have special meaning?
- ✓ If you had a certain routine that changed after the person died, how did it change — for the better — or for the worse.
- ✓ Have you had any dreams about the person that died? If so, describe your dream.
- ✓ If you had to explain death to someone younger than you, what would you say?
- ✓ What does the death of this person mean to you?
- ✓ If you believe that a person goes somewhere else after they die, what do you think it looks like?
- ✓ If you could say anything you wanted to the person who died and that person could hear you, what would you say?
- ✓ How has your world changed since this person died?
- ✓ What is your favorite memory of the person who died?
- ✓ What was your biggest fear after this person died?
- ✓ People usually mean well, but they don't always say things that seem nice or helpful. What were some things people said to you that made you feel worse/more confused/angry instead of better?
- ✓ Did you ever feel numb, confused, or angry after the person died?
- ✓ What do you do to help you with these feelings?
- ✓ If you created a ritual after the person died, what was it?
- ✓ If you were magically granted three wishes, what would you wish?
- ✓ If you could change two things about your life, what would the two things be?
- ✓ What questions do you still have about what happened?
- ✓ Is there anything you are doing now that would make the person who died proud of you?

## Activities to Do with a Grieving Child

Employees typically grieve within the context of family. One of the biggest problems for bereaved workers is worrying about how their children are coping. To reduce this burden, employee assistance professionals may wish to help grieving workers engage in activities that employees can pursue with their children.

- ✓ List as many people as you can who would be there for you if you ever felt really sad or hopeless.
- ✓ What grief reactions have you noticed in your body?
- ✓ On a sheet of paper, draw a picture of the place on your body that hurts or feels mixed-up.
- ✓ If you did not have a chance to say goodbye, on a sheet of paper, write a goodbye letter and keep it in a special place.
- ✓ Create a scrapbook with special words and pictures that remind you of the person who died.

- ✓ If you could go back in time to be with the person who died, which day would you choose?
- ✓ Create a memory box out of a shoebox, coffee can, or plastic storage container. Decorate your memory box with ribbon, wrapping paper, sparkle glue, buttons, pictures from magazines, and crayons. Write your loved one's name on the box and fill it with things that remind you of him or her. You can fill it with things like photos, jewelry, vacation souvenirs, or ticket stubs.
- ✓ Make a collage. First get a piece of oak tag or large sheet of paper. Cut out pictures from magazines of things that remind you of the person you lost. Place some glue on the back of each picture and place them on the oak tag or paper.

*Source: Rubel, B. (2009) "But I Didn't Say Goodbye: Helping children and families after a suicide" (Second Edition). NJ: Griefwork Center, Inc.*