Dealing with Grief at Work

Grief is a normal part of life and will often impact employees at work. There are many different types of grief involving loss, such as death, relationship breakdowns, job loss, loss of culture or lifestyle, loss of a pet, and loss of health. Acute grief may last 3-6 months and it may take an individual anywhere 2-5 years to adjust their life following a difficult loss.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that in 2008 there were 141,700 deaths recorded. During 2005 2,101 deaths or 1.6% of all deaths were from suicide, and during 2006 child deaths accounted for 1.3% of all deaths recorded (ABS 2005 and 2006). Sadly, it is likely that you or one of your employees is likely to know a friend or family member that has a terminal illness, or a friend who has suicided or someone who has lost a child. Given the current economic climate, many people are also grieving the loss of their job.

Another common cause of grief that may impact employees is relationship breakdown and divorce. Sadly, one in three marriages ends in divorce and some research suggests that it may take up to two years for people to recover emotionally following a divorce (Fisher 2005). According to ABS statistics, in 2007 there were 47,963 divorces granted and nearly 50% of those marriages involved one or more children (ABS 2007).

Grief can leave managers and co-workers feeling unsure about the “best” way to help someone experiencing grief. It can also be a challenging situation for managers when dealing with performance issues when someone is experiencing personal difficulties and grief. This article outlines some information about the grief process and provides some coping strategies for managers and individuals. While you cannot “fix” grief, listening to and supporting an individual through the grieving process may often be one of the most helpful things you can do. The routine, structure and social contact of work can actually provide help and some sense of “normality” for a grieving individual.

While everyone’s experience of grief is different, there are usually some common grief reactions:

Physical – fatigue, tiredness, disturbed sleep, reduced appetite (or for some people increased appetite). Some people may also experience illness as a result of depressed immune systems when grieving and this may result in increased sick leave. If you think there may be an issue of avoiding work through taking sick leave, it may be helpful to sit down with the individual and discuss their concerns and look for ways to help them cope with work (possibly including temporarily reduced hours – building back up to full time work).

Thought patterns – reduced concentration, difficulty problem solving and making decisions, poor short-term memory. This may impact an employee’s productivity and performance and it may be helpful to sit down with the individual to discuss ways to provide support mechanisms at work. It may be particularly important to put some “checks and balances” in place where the employee’s role involves risk assessment and safety issues. Encourage the individual to discuss any difficulties with you and act together in trying to solve the problems at hand.

Emotional – feeling numb or conversely feeling highly emotional, intense sadness, anger, irritability, anxiety, teariness. It is normal for grieving individuals to feel easily teary and it is important to provide a quiet spot if possible when they are distressed and let them know it is OK to be teary at this time. In fact, grief research has found that tears of grief contain chemicals that help people feel better, adding some scientific weight to the old saying of “feeling better after a good cry”.

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Denial is the body’s defence mechanism when feeling overwhelmed and can be an adaptive coping strategy for people in the early intense stages of grief. However, denial becomes maladaptive if the individual cannot move toward acknowledging the loss over time and professional assistance may be needed in such cases. As pain is a subjective experience, it is not helpful or a consolation for the individual grieving, to hear that someone else may be “worse off”. Open expression of grief is not encouraged in most Western cultures and this can sometimes prolong grief and even leave the individual more prone to illness. Grief is sometimes referred to as a “passionate sadness” and while some symptoms of grief are similar to depression, grief is usually a normal and healthy reaction to loss. Guilt and regret are also a normal part of the grieving process and the individual may need someone to listen to these feelings before providing reassurance that it was not their fault or that the person knew how much they loved them. Intense sadness and regret that they cannot change what has happened and how much they miss what is lost is usually the true emotion behind the guilt. Individuals may also need to repeat their “story” to process what has happened, especially in the initial stages of grief.

Individual may return to work and appear to be “getting back to normal” and grief can often come in “waves”. Individuals may experience “grief spikes” prior to and on special dates or occasions, such as anniversaries, birthdays, family gatherings or Christmas holidays.

Managers can assist people when grieving by listening to them and acknowledging their loss, whilst being careful to avoid becoming the employee’s “counsellor”. You could also encourage them to access their social supports, such as friends or family. You may also want to offer professional assistance through the organisation’s EAP program. If an employee’s family member has died, it may also helpful to get their immediate team together and send a card with flowers or put together a donation to the relevant charity or research body (for example donating to the cancer council if the family member has died of cancer).

Self care and coping strategies include:

► Acknowledge the loss – it is important for yourself and others to acknowledge your loss.

► Healthy grief involves the expression of sometimes intense emotions – you need someone to listen who will be able to let you talk of your loss without platitudes that “everything will be OK”. Grief may intensify 4-6 weeks after the loss – this is often when your body’s protective chemicals are at a low and people’s support may be lessening as others are getting back to their normal lives and routines.

► Time may not heal all wounds but it does help to reduce their intensity and “rawness”.

► Allow others to help you – by listening or offering practical help. However, also be willing to tell people what you need and what would be helpful. Some people may offer well-intentioned advice but you need to find what works for you. Practical help may be making meals, buying groceries, calling people, picking up the children, whatever would assist you. Letting others help you not only assists you, but often also lets the people who are helping to feel they have been of some help in a situation where they may feel “helpless” as to what support they can give.

► Exercise – this can help counteract the stress hormones and adrenalin in your body and promote endorphins, which are nature’s antidepressants.

► Grief and stress can suppress the immune system so it is important to try to try to eat healthily and drink water. However, it is also normal to feel unable to eat initially, so just try to eat small amounts of plain food. See your local GP if you have any health concerns.

► You may find certain once celebratory dates or rituals painful, such as birthdays, anniversaries, family gathering and Christmas. This is normal and you may need to seek extra support at these times.
► You may want to delay making major decisions for 12-18 months as grief can impact your decision-making capacity.

► Avoid excessive alcohol as whilst this may feel as though it helps to numb the pain and get to sleep, alcohol can cause many problems and actually results in poor quality sleep, leaving you feel more tired and overwhelmed.

► Take great care when driving as reduced concentration can increase the risk of having an accident.

► Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed. Whilst the counsellor or psychologist may not be able to “make the pain go away”, they are likely to provide emotional support and suggest strategies which may assist you in “getting through” a difficult time. It can also be helpful having someone outside your family or friends that you can “download” to and you don’t have to worry about their feelings or how they are coping.