

## Grief in the Workplace

*Walking Alongside of, Learning from, & Listening to the Griever*

**By Deb Kosmer**

Helping hurting employees can be complicated, challenging, and confusing, especially when the employee's needs and reactions change from one day to the next. The grieving person is often unsure what they want from others, which complicates things further. Just as there is no rulebook as to the length and pattern of grief, there is no right way to respond, no checklist of solutions to provide needed assistance.

It is important to remember that grief is not a cloak someone can take off when they walk out the door. It accompanies a person wherever he or she goes, which by necessity includes the workplace. It is commonly understood that a person who is grieving the death of a loved one will feel sad, and that is often the case. However, the *strongest* feeling they may be struggling to deal with might involve guilt or anger. These feelings can be harder to share, and possibly more difficult for someone to hear. In order to effectively help others, we need to recognize our own levels of discomfort, our hot topics, our perceptions ... and perhaps our misconceptions about *"the right way or length of time people should be allowed to grieve."*

Helping a grieving employee also involves a balancing act between supporting the hurting worker, while also juggling work-related responsibilities. Achieving this balance is not easy. We want to show we have compassion and are committed to the employee's needs, but in the day-to-day operations of a business, it isn't always possible to be as generous and understanding as a company might wish to be.

### **When to Make a Referral**

Grief is a natural response to loss, but most people will not need the help of a professional in dealing with it. Having the love and support of others who will allow them to grieve in their own way is often all that is necessary. However, when grief becomes paralyzing and the person is not able to function after a period of time, a referral to an employee assistance professional can be an excellent source of help – to both the employee and management.

It is important for co-workers, and particularly for supervisors and managers to have a clear understanding of their roles and areas of expertise ... and to allow others to provide additional support and assistance when needed. A clear understanding of what those lines are help identify when it's time to make a referral. This can vary from one person to another, although there are some common indicators such as:

- Excessive absenteeism and/or chronic lateness;
- Personality changes;
- Significant decline in quality of work; and/or
- Unusual behavior or appearance.

Mitigating factors can include a known history of depression or drug or alcohol abuse and simultaneous stressors or losses in the individual's life. Factoring in a person's previous work history within the company will also help in this determination.

### **Walking, Learning & Listening**

Many employees that are referred to EAPs or community grief professionals do not require intense therapy. Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a well-respected therapist, educator, author, and national speaker on grief, writes and lectures extensively about his philosophy of companioning the bereaved versus treating. Three of his tenets of companioning involve *walking alongside* of the griever, not leading; *learning from* them, not teaching; and *listening to* the griever (from the heart, not analyzing with the head). Many people are fortunate enough to have caring individuals in their lives who are able to meet these needs. However, when that support is *not* available, a professional counselor who understands these tenets and the needs of the bereaved can be instrumental in helping the bereaved person.

### **When WE are the Ones Grieving**

Sometimes WE are those hurting persons. My 7-month-old nephew recently died after our family made the painful but necessary decision to take him off life support. My nephew spent his entire life in a hospital neonatal intensive care unit. There were many ups and downs during his brief life, with many more downs than ups.

It was heart-wrenching not knowing if he would make it through another day. In spite of the incredible odds that were against him, it is always hard to give up hope, especially when a loved one is fighting so hard to live.

My work in hospice means that I am surrounded by death and dying on a daily basis, but as we all know it's somehow different when the person dying is someone that WE love. I was very open with my co-workers throughout my nephew's struggle. I will always be grateful for the love and support that was shown to me both before and after my nephew's death.

I was also saddened and surprised that even in the grief field; some of my co-workers have never acknowledged his death ... or my grief. This experience reinforced for me the difficulty that individuals and society have when it comes to the subject of dying and the people affected by it. As I contemplated with a heavy

heart, my return to work a few days after my nephew's funeral I wrote these words:

*Tomorrow life goes back to normal...I'll go to work...I'll style my hair... I'll smile at people... I will act like I'm OK and life is normal...But it's not and I'm not normal or OK ... I'll talk to people... I'll listen to their pain...I'll try to act normal and OK...But inside my heart is broken, and I'm not sure how to make that OK.*

## **Summary**

We all have the capacity to be a healing force in someone's life. It may be something as simple as a smile, a sincerely spoken; *"I am thinking about you," "I am praying for you and your family"* or *"How can I help?"*

In the workplace, there are countless opportunities to be a caring presence in someone's life. Returning to work can often be very therapeutic to a grieving employee. It can provide some semblance of normalcy and routine that may be absent from their life otherwise.

In my work as a grief counselor, I hear many examples of both positive and negative experiences of bereaved employees. Employees who have been shown compassion and understanding speak very highly of their employers. Although this shouldn't be a company's sole reason for caring, this sort of concern can reap positive dividends for a long time.

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