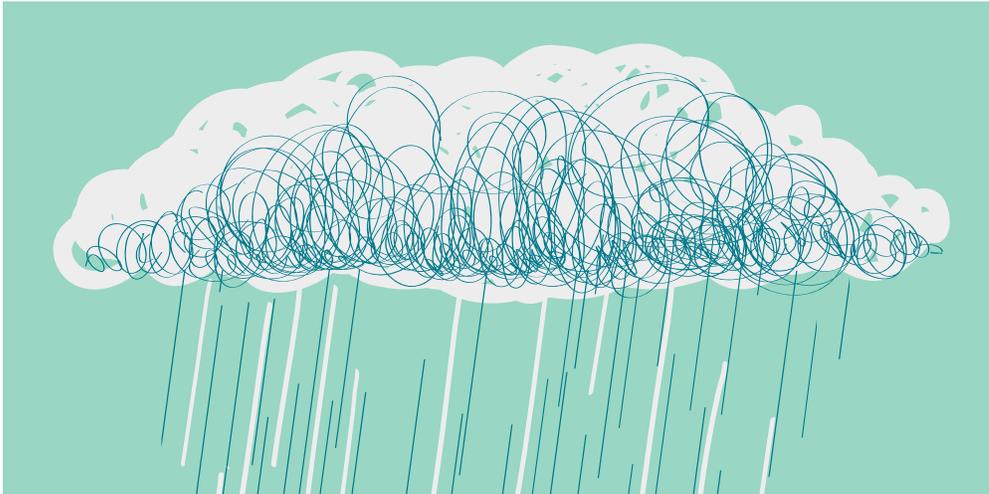


# Grief in the workplace

What every employer should know

WHITE PAPER





**Grief is a fundamental human experience. Almost every employee will experience the loss of a loved one during their career, and most will lose more than one. Today, demographic shifts such as delayed retirements, parents living longer, increases in mortality due to COVID-19, and other factors have led to a rise in the numbers of employees dealing with grief.**

The emotional and health impacts of grief can last for months or years, and can contribute to decreased productivity, a rise in absences, and even job loss. To effectively manage their workforce, employers must be prepared to support their employees through the grieving process. But, often, managers and co-workers may not know how to react appropriately or what measures to take.

This white paper explains:

- The normal grieving process
- Situations that may present particular challenges
- Ways employers can help their employees cope and recover
- Additional resources

Employees are any company's most valuable resource. Instituting a program of training and support can help employees through the human experience of grief—strengthening their loyalty and productivity, and contributing to the cohesion of the workplace as a whole.



## The typical grieving process

Most employees will have this experience several times during their working lives.<sup>1</sup> Feelings of numbness, despair, denial, and helplessness are common soon after the loss, as are poor memory, difficulty concentrating, and obsessive thoughts about the departed. In most cases, these symptoms gradually resolve over the following weeks or months, yet emotional swings and other effects may persist for longer.

About 5% of the workforce—**one in every 20 employees**—suffers the loss of a loved one every year.

The typical grieving process involves gradual acceptance and adjustment to the new reality, the expression of a wide variety of emotions, and restoration to a more normal emotional state.<sup>2</sup> The stress of this time can lead to physical and psychological health problems. For example, the risk of a heart attack is more than 20 times greater during the acute grieving period than at other times in life.<sup>3</sup> Social support can be key to recovery and restoration of a new normal state.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sandberg S. Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy (Knopf, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/grief> (Updated 11/5/2019)

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor MF. Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind, and Brain Adapt. *Psychosom Med.* 2019;81(8):731-738.

<sup>4</sup> Grief bereavement and coping with loss (NIH, 2019) - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK66052/>

## Severe grief

A variety of factors can cause a person's grieving process to be more difficult.

For example:

- Certain situations may lead to longer and/or more intense grieving, such as an unexpected or sudden loss, or the death of a spouse or child.
- Difficult end-of-life experiences in the past may complicate the grieving process.
- Unresolved issues with the deceased or dissatisfaction with end of life care may contribute to prolonged grieving.
- A lack of human connections can contribute to a more difficult grieving process. This problem is especially prevalent during the COVID epidemic, where loved ones may die unexpectedly or alone, and distancing measures may reduce social support for survivors.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, cultural norms influence the emotions and actions that are considered acceptable, the length of the mourning period, and the recovery process.

## Complicated grief

In some cases, grief may be especially intense or prolonged, and might even become permanent – a condition called complicated grief.

**Complicated grief affects 9.8% of people who have suffered a significant loss, but it is more frequent in certain situations and appears to have become more common during the COVID pandemic.**<sup>6,7</sup>

People with this disorder may be profoundly affected at times but function normally at other times. Medication usually is not helpful; the most successful treatment is often cognitive-behavioral therapy. This therapy focuses on accepting the new reality and reframing the sufferer's perspective on life.<sup>8</sup>

Frequency of complicated grief after loss of a loved one	
All grieving persons	9.8%
Loss of a child	50-70%
Loss due to homicide / suicide	22%
Loss of a spouse	20%
High caregiving burden	15-30%
Unresolved interpersonal or care issues	15-30%

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/grief-distance> - 4/6/20

<sup>6</sup> Shear MK. Clinical practice. Complicated grief. N Engl J Med. 2015 Jan 8;372(2):153-60.

<sup>7</sup> Nakajima S. Complicated grief: recent developments in diagnostic criteria and treatment. Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci. 2018;373(1754):20170273.

<sup>8</sup> Johanssen M, Damholdt MF et al. Psychological interventions for grief in adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. Jour Affective Disorders. 2019; 253: 69-86.

## Depression and grief



About 5% of grieving people develop significant clinical depression, although this development is more frequent in people with a history of clinical depression. Sufferers exhibit many of the same symptoms as others with complicated grief, but they also experience a persistent depressed mood, and their ability to function is impaired more consistently and to a greater degree. Their symptoms often are accompanied by feelings of profound sadness, despair, detachment, loss of self-worth, and/or thoughts of self-harm.<sup>9</sup>

Clinical depression related to grief is a serious psychiatric disorder; people suffering with it are at risk of suicide and should be promptly referred for evaluation and treatment. Appropriate medical treatment and counseling frequently lead to rapid improvement.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Shear MK. Clinical practice. Complicated grief. *N Engl J Med*. 2015 Jan 8;372(2):153-60.

<sup>10</sup> Shear MK, Reynolds CF, Simon NM, et al.: Optimizing Treatment of Complicated Grief: A Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA Psychiatry* 73 (7): 685-94, 2016.

## Grief and the workplace

The grieving process can have a profound effect on employees' performance. Most people who have lost a loved one initially find it impossible to function well at work. Sick days tend to increase after a loss, and distraction, emotional swings, decreased concentration and low creativity are common.

Companies generally recognize this challenge and accommodate it by encouraging employees to take bereavement leave. Yet symptoms often persist for many months, and in some cases last much longer. For example, one study found that few bereaved parents said they were able to return to normal work function even after five years.<sup>11</sup>

**By some estimates, grief places a total annual productivity burden on US employers worth more than \$80 billion – equal to the combined impact of anxiety and depression.<sup>12</sup>**

Our society often expects employees to leave personal emotions at home and focus on job performance.<sup>13</sup> Yet it's not realistic to ask employees to check their grief at the door, and the conflict between grieving employees' emotions and societal expectations can lead to problems in the workplace. A grieving employee may cry, express anger or sadness, and have difficulty concentrating or a lack of interest in work. Co-workers may not know how to respond, and may avoid the grieving person. One study found that a third of grieving parents said they were avoided by co-workers, and some considered changing jobs as a result.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Wilcox HC, Mittendorfer-Rutz E, Kjeldgård L, Alexanderson K, Runeson B. Functional impairment due to bereavement after the death of adolescent or young adult offspring in a national population study of 1,051,515 parents. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol.* 2015;50(8):1249-1256.

<sup>12</sup> Sandberg S. *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* (Knopf, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Kate Jackson. Grief in the Workplace -When its not Business as Usual. *Social Work Today*, March/April 2016, v16, p24.

<sup>14</sup> Fielden JM. Grief as a transformative experience: weaving through different lifeworlds after a loved one has committed suicide. *International J Mental Health Nursing.* 2003, 12: 74-85.

## What employers can do

An employer's response can have a profound impact on an employee's grieving process. Appropriate, timely responses can comfort the bereaved, provide reassurance, support the process of recovery and return to productivity, and ultimately build loyalty.

Many organizations that deal with death often, such as those in health care, hospice, funeral services, and emergency services, have learned how the workplace and co-workers can play a supportive role.<sup>15</sup> Their experiences offer valuable lessons:



### 1. Support advance planning

The most common cause for employee grief is loss of an older loved one. In many cases, the grieving employee is responsible for end-of-life care, and they may experience exhaustion and distraction for months before the death occurs. This scenario has become more frequent, with less than half of all deaths now occurring in hospitals.<sup>16</sup>

The Conversation Project is a national effort to encourage families to communicate about end of life wishes and make plans for care before they are needed.<sup>17</sup> Advance planning can help employees engage outside support, reducing the burden of care. It also can help families prepare for the steps they must take after a loss. Lincoln Financial has developed a resource for family members, "[Taking the Next Step](#)," which describes the actions that family members must take after the death of a loved one – helpful information to prepare for the future.

Family members who have these conversations in advance are more likely to accept the passing of their loved one, and are 53% less likely to have complicated grief and 50% less likely to have grief-related major depression.<sup>18</sup> Advance estate planning can also reduce the administrative burden on survivors, as many tools are available to help organize this process.<sup>19,20</sup> Employers can encourage their employees to use these resources – for their own well-being as well as their loved ones'.

<sup>15</sup> Reed E, Waghorn M, Gregory A et al. Exploring the experience of returning to work after personal bereavement. *Int J Palliat Nurs*. 2019 Nov 2;25(11):525-530

<sup>16</sup> Wilson DM, Shen Y, Birch S. New evidence on end of life hospital utilization. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*. 2017, 20(7): 752-758.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ihi.org/Engage/Initiatives/ConversationProject/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 7/15/20)

<sup>18</sup> Otani H, Yoshida S, Morita T, et al.: Meaningful Communication Before Death, but Not Present at the Time of Death Itself, Is Associated With Better Outcomes on Measures of Depression and Complicated Grief Among Bereaved Family Members of Cancer Patients. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 54 (3): 273-279, 2017

<sup>19</sup> <https://lifehacker.com/five-things-to-do-when-planning-for-your-digital-death-1826496843> (published 6/2/18)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/life-events-and-you/life-events/money-musts-before-you-die> (accessed 7/19/20)



## 2. Respect individual preferences

Cultural and individual differences influence the support that individual grievers want and expect. Encourage co-workers to communicate condolences about an employee's loss, and then to ask what kinds of workplace support the grieving person would like. Some appreciate flowers and a workplace representative at the funeral; others might find this degree of involvement intrusive.

Ask the employee how they would like information about the loss communicated within the workplace.<sup>21</sup> Between the time of the loss and the funeral, encourage the employee to set up an away message on their email and avoid communication from the workplace. And offer a copy of "Taking the Next Step," which contains evidence-based suggestions for navigating the mourning process, managing administrative details, and obtaining benefits.



## 3. Discuss the return to work

Some employees prefer to return to work early, comforted by returning to their normal routine; others may need more time away from the workplace. Grieving employees almost always experience a period of decreased productivity, which typically resolves gradually. Most managers are aware of this and make appropriate accommodations. An employer anticipating a prolonged period of decreased work performance may consider gradual return to work and return to regular duties, or a temporary assignment.<sup>22</sup>

It is essential not to appear to use an employee's temporary inability to perform their duties as a reason for discipline or termination – this perception can have a profound impact on morale and loyalty.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Kate Jackson, Grief in the Workplace - When its not Business as Usual. Social Work Today, March/April 2016, v16, p24.

<sup>22</sup> Gibson op cit

<sup>23</sup> <https://rednosegriefandloss.org.au/support/article/employers-and-colleagues-further-reading> (accessed 7/19/20)



#### 4. Consider leave policies

Given the impact that bereavement can have on productivity, it may be helpful for employees to have a period of time to mourn and adjust to the loss. Typical bereavement leave is one to two days, but most employees need more time away from work—to make funeral arrangements, to observe culturally appropriate mourning periods, and to recover from a profound psychological event.

### The COVID epidemic has disrupted normal grieving for many people, and thus may require greater flexibility from employers.

Yet today there is no job-protected leave available for bereavement. For example, the Family Medical and Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 would cease to provide leave after the death of an immediate family member for whom the employee acted as a caregiver. Short leave periods force employees to use vacation or sick time for additional periods away from work. Using sick time can be counterproductive: Workers may need to obtain a documented medical diagnosis and end up with unnecessary treatment, in order to qualify for sick leave.

Instead, employers should look to understand the needs of individual employees. An individualized approach can help determine whether additional leave or either gradual or flexible return to work arrangements might help the employee transition back to work successfully. More companies today are considering policies that allow for extended bereavement leave and gradual return to work for those who need it.<sup>24</sup>



#### 5. Stay in touch after the employee returns

The most common complaint of grieving employees is that people at work didn't listen – that co-workers either avoided them or told them how they should feel. Ongoing communication is essential, as emotions, needs, and desires change through the grieving process. Check in with the grieving employee periodically to ask how re-entry is going and what might be helpful.

<sup>24</sup> Sandberg S. Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy (Knopf, 2017).



### 6. Offer help if the employee seems to be struggling

An employee who is having particular difficulty after a loss may benefit from a referral to counselors with expertise in the grieving process. An Employee Assistance Program may facilitate the referral;<sup>25</sup> many are affiliated with local hospice organizations. These experts can assess how the employee is progressing in their grieving process and whether they are having significant health or psychological consequences that need further treatment, and can make further referrals as needed. This expertise is especially important if the employee shows signs of complicated grief or depression.



### 7. Death of a coworker

Loss of a co-worker can have a powerful impact on the workplace, especially in a close-knit group. It creates a complex challenge for the manager, who must deal with her own grief about the loss, as well as the grief of all the co-workers and the potential impact on teamwork and productivity.

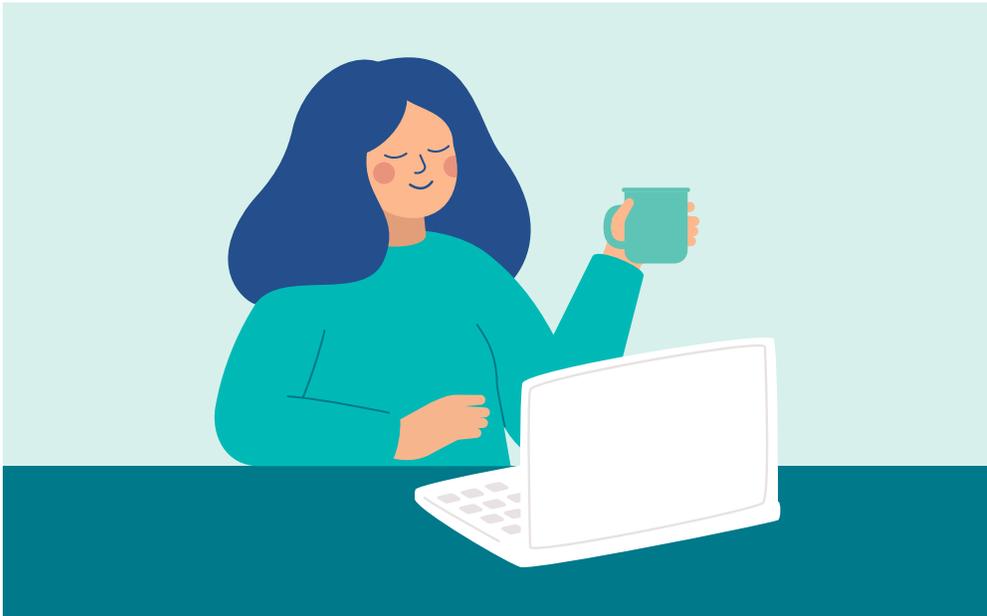
The main principles for managing this situation are similar to those in other instances with grieving employees: Acknowledge the loss; recognize that individual co-workers may deal with the situation very differently; set aside time to reflect, both collectively and individually; and check in periodically with employees to see how they are handling the loss.

Also talk with the deceased's family to find out how they would like the workplace represented in the mourning process, and what they would like communicated to co-workers. Family members will need information about their loved one's employment-related benefits, so a designated human resources representative may be their best resource.

Among co-workers, discuss how to respond as a group, including what actions are appropriate to memorialize the co-worker and how to move on.<sup>26</sup> Temporary redistribution of work is important at first. Be mindful about the timing of any permanent readjustment, as well as steps such as cleaning out the employee's office: You don't want to act too quickly and appear insensitive, or to let the workplace readjustment drag on too long. If the work group appears to be stuck, it may be helpful to engage outside resources with expertise in recovery from grief, perhaps from the employee assistance program or local hospice agencies. "Moving Forward" provides employers with specific guidance on managing the loss of a coworker, including specific roles and responsibilities, actions at different stages of the grieving process, and where to go for assistance.

<sup>25</sup> Kate Jackson, Grief in the Workplace - When its not Business as Usual. Social Work Today, March/April 2016, v16, p24.

<sup>26</sup> <https://rednosegriefandloss.org.au/support/article/employers-and-colleagues-further-reading> (accessed 7/19/20)



## A supportive strategy

Loss of a loved one or co-worker is a profound emotional event that affects each person differently. How the workplace responds throughout the grieving process can have a considerable impact on employee health, productivity, and morale. Handled properly, a time of grief is an opportunity for an employer to demonstrate to employees how much it values them, both as workers and as people.

Employers that follow best practices around employee grieving tend to experience better outcomes, helping them cultivate more loyal and productive employees. During the current COVID epidemic, a supportive strategy may be more important than ever.

### Additional resources

- **Advance planning / decision-making**  
[The Conversation Project](#)
- **Planning for your digital legacy**  
[Life Hacker](#)
- **Guidance for managers - dealing with grieving employees**
  - [American Hospice](#)
  - [Social Work Today](#)
  - [Grief.com](#)

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