

Grief & Bereavement Literacy Series

Grief in the Workplace

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BY
Pallium Canada



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Introductions

Educational Presenter

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Poll

Rate your current knowledge level on today's topic of grief in the workplace

Learning Objectives

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

Identify different ways in which grief affects employees in the workplace

Understand the roles played by organizations, management, and employees in supporting a bereaved colleague.

More comfortably engage with and meaningfully support grieving colleagues.

Beyond the death of a loved one

Grief is a natural response to loss – **any** loss. Different kinds of loss can include:

- Infertility and pregnancy loss
- Loss of a pet
- Loss of identity
- Divorce, separation, or loss of other important relationships
- A loved one affected by Substance Use Disorder or a significant mental illness
- Acquiring a disability or life-altering illness
- Loss of home (moving, eviction, fire, natural disaster, etc.)
- Career changes, layoffs, not meeting professional goals

Identifying when someone around us is experiencing grief is important so that we can be more understanding and better support their journey.

Beyond the death of a loved one

Other types of grief that employees may experience:

- **Anticipatory grief:** Grieving a loss before it occurs (*pre-grieving, preparatory grief, anticipatory loss*)
- **Collective grief:** When a loss affects a community, society, or large group of people experience extreme change or loss. It can result from major events such as armed conflict, natural disasters, mass casualties or other tragedies.
- **Disenfranchised Grief:** Grief that society (or a part of it) limits, does not expect, or may not allow a person to express. This can cause isolation, and additional distress for the bereaved person.

What Impacts Grief

Other circumstances that can affect a person's experience of grief:



- **Caregiving:** Providing care for someone is a significant responsibility and can affect the relationship the caregiver has with the person receiving care. A caregiver may grieve the life they had before being a caregiver, their loved one's illness or anticipated death, or turning down career opportunities to prioritize their caregiving.
- **Religious or cultural beliefs** can influence a person's reaction to or understanding of death or loss.
- **Cumulative or compounded grief:** When a person experiences multiple losses at once, or in a relatively short succession, they are more likely to struggle to cope with each loss because of the compounding effect.

How does grief affect the workplace?

The effects of grief at work may be open, or they may be hidden.

Open effects of grief are those that are easy to see and connect to loss, like someone openly showing emotion when expressing their loss.

Hidden effects of grief are not as easy to notice or connect to someone's sense of loss. For example, increased irritability, or reduced concentration.

It's important to recognize the different ways that grief can show up at work so that organizations, management, and employees can better support their bereaved colleagues.



How does grief affect the workplace?

Individuals

For the grieving person:

- Reduced motivation, pace of work, and concentration
- Feeling isolated or disconnected from their team and peers
- Emotions “intruding” on their workday
- Fatigue, irritability, and forgetfulness
- Feeling discouraged from sharing their grief or displaying negative emotions
- Physical effects like nausea, reduced appetite, sleep difficulties, and headaches
- Increase in work absences due to illness or poor mental health

For those around the grieving person:

- Short-term “covering” for the grieving person while they are on bereavement leave
- Discomfort or uncertainty in interactions with grieving person
 - A typical reaction to this uncertainty is to act as though the loss did not happen.
- Resentment that their workload may temporarily increase if the grieving person is not performing at normal capacity

How does grief affect the workplace?

Management

- Increased absenteeism
- Reduced team performance and morale
- Maintain balance between work deliverables and providing adequate supports for grieving employee(s)
- Discomfort or uncertainty in interactions with grieving person
- May experience uncertainty in what HR policies allow or disallow for bereavement leave or other types of accommodations for a grieving person
 - This can lead to a case of “manager-roulette” where grieving employees’ experiences of support vary widely across an organization

Organization

- Reduced productivity and profitability due to increased :
 - mistakes,
 - absenteeism,
 - missed deadlines, etc.
- Poor organizational morale
- Less compassionate and welcoming organizational culture

If employees feel unsupported by the organization:

- Reduced commitment to the organization
- Higher turnover
- Lower employee satisfaction

How does grief affect the workplace?

The importance of organizational culture

In work environments where the culture does not proactively provide space to address grief and other negative emotions, grieving employees are less likely to :

- Share if / when they are grieving a loss
- Ask for leave or accommodations
- Seek support at or through work

And more likely to:

- Feel like their grief should be “left at the door”
- Feel disconnected and isolated, which can lead to experiencing negative effects from *disenfranchised grief*.
- Feel guilty or ashamed if they are under-performing at work because of the effects of grief.



Bereavement Leave & HR Policies

What do bereavement leave policies look like in Canada?

** Typical bereavement leave and related human resources policies provided by organizations in Canada provide:

- Leave for approximately 3 days or less, often unpaid
 - The leave must often be taken within a set number weeks of the death and/or funeral.
- Reserved for deaths of specified close family members
- Only really allows individuals to attend funerals or other rituals related to the death

** *These policies will vary depending on provincially mandated requirements for bereavement leave, and in federally regulated workplaces.*

Other Common Employer-provided Grief Supports

- Referral to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Temporary adjustment of work duties like shorter workdays, or a transfer to a lower stress area or less demanding role.

What does this look like in practice?

A study of 131 Edmonton businesses showed that :

- Over 60% of businesses had one or more employees take bereavement leave in the previous year.
- The average bereavement leave (paid) was 2.5 days long, with an added 1.3 days for travel or other death-related matters.
 - Only 5% of the businesses paid their employees during this additional leave.

Bereavement Leave & HR Policies

Having a bereavement policy matters.

In organizations with a bereavement policy, employees are:

- More likely to take bereavement leave
- More likely to take longer bereavement leave

Organizations with a bereavement policy are:

- Less likely to report concerns about their employees after they return to work.
- More likely to offer a wider variety of accommodations to employees after they return to work
 - Accommodations provided by organization without a policy are usually limited only to shorter workdays or work weeks.

Organization Size

Medium and small organizations are less likely to have a formal bereavement leave policy, whereas nearly all large organizations do.



Bereavement Leave & HR Policies

Are current bereavement leave and human resource policies adequate?

The Canadian Grief Alliance's 2023 survey of nearly 4,000 Canadians who experienced grief showed stark results.

Key takeaways

50% didn't feel adequately supported in their grief.

53% felt their grief wasn't adequately recognized.

Notably, a number of frequently accessed sources of support were reported to be less helpful than people hoped including healthcare systems, employer resources, and helplines.

Canadian employers can and must do better.

How can we better support bereaved employees?

Set the tone

Organizational leaders and managers play a critical role in setting the tone for how compassion and bereavement support are implemented at work.

Bereaved employees need CARE:

- **Communication**
- **Accommodation**
- **Recognition**
- **Emotional support**

Options for helpful accommodations for a bereaved employee's return to work

- Flex-time
- Shortened workdays or work weeks
- Longer or more frequent breaks
- Work from home arrangements
- Decreased workload
- Temporary reassignment to a lower stress setting or less demanding work duties
- A quiet space to work
- A private area where they can go to take a break or collect themselves

Source: Gilbert, S., et.al. (2021). The C.A.R.E. model of employee bereavement support. Journal of occupational health psychology.

How can we better support bereaved employees?

What to Avoid - Organizations & Managers

- *“Back to business as usual”* : This dismisses the employee’s experience of loss and implies that their grief should not interfere with their work.
- *Treating the employee as fragile*: This can feel infantilizing to the bereaved employee, like they should be grieving differently, or like they are expected to perform or express their grief at work to receive support.
- *Policy over people*: Bereavement policies should intend to support an employee, to provide compassionate support, and to avoid imposing bureaucracy on their grief. Flexibility and adaptability are key.

Good Management Practices

- Provide support and accommodations based on need, not on a timeline
 - Grief is not linear; someone may require more support after a few weeks or months than they do immediately after the loss.
- Check in when important anniversaries or holidays are coming up
- Proactively provide information to all staff about grief support resources that may help bereaved employees.
- When sharing news about an employee’s loss with the wider organization, provide reminders on :
 - Empathic communication
 - What to say and what not to say
 - How to support a bereaved colleague.
- Encourage mutual support, personalized gestures, and collective expressions of support
 - Ex: Group condolence card or allowing employees time to attend their colleague’s loved one’s memorial.

How can we better support bereaved employees?

Organizations

- Have a comprehensive and flexible bereavement policy.
 - Adequate, paid, leave for bereaved employees, beyond the legislated minimum.
 - Flexibility built within the bereavement leave policy to account, for example, for:
 - Other cultural or religious death-related practices,
 - “Nontraditional” nuclear family structures and close relationships outside the immediate family (ex: foster sibling, close friend, uncle who was “like a father”)
 - Expanded timelines for bereavement leave
 - Include additional paid leave for other non-funeral or memorial death-related matters (ex: travel, estate management)
- Enumerate a variety of accommodations for bereaved employees to be made available when they return to work
- Ensure managers and employees are aware of and understand the bereavement policy.
- Foster an organizational culture that is committed to compassion and support for bereaved and grieving employees
- Provide training for managers and leaders on supporting bereaved employees, compassionate practices, and active listening.
- Encourage employee wellness, including work-life balance and mental wellbeing.

How can we better support bereaved employees?

What you can do to support a bereaved colleague

- Ask about their loss and how they want to be supported
- Don't try to "fix" their grief or to "make it better". Grief can't be fixed, but it can be supported.
- Follow through on your offers to help.
- Be understanding that they may not be "back to normal" for a while. It can take weeks, months, or sometimes years.
- Check in with them around important anniversaries or holidays.
- If your colleague shares their story, they may need to share it with you multiple times. That is a normal part of the process.
- Know your boundaries. If you're overwhelmed, uncomfortable, or if you can't help them at that time, that is okay.
 - Ex: "What you're saying is important, so I'd like to help you find someone who can be a better listener for you, because right now I'm not able to do that."

Remember that grief can affect a person's:

- Sleep
- Memory
- Ability to concentrate

It can also make a person feel more:

- Fatigued
- Irritable
- Vulnerable
- Overwhelmed

Everyone's response to grief is different. Some people find comfort in the familiarity of work, while others may find work too demanding when grieving. That is normal.

How can we better support bereaved employees?

As Individuals At Work

| What not to say | Say this instead |
|---|--|
| “I know how you feel” | “I know I struggled when I lost someone, but I don’t know what your experience is like. Do you want to tell me what it has been like for you?” |
| “They’re in a better place” (or other attempts to reframe the loss as positive) | “I’m sorry that this is so hard.” |
| <i>Saying nothing</i> | “I don’t know what to say, but I want you to know that I care.” |
| “Everything happens for a reason” | “What does your loss feel like today?” |
| “How can I help?” | <i>Offer specific help, for example: “Can I help you with the Johnson report?” or “Would it help if I took the lead on the X project for you?”</i> |

Conclusion

Grief comes in many forms, and everyone reacts to it differently. We will all experience grief in our lives. When grief comes to the workplace:

- **Organizations** are responsible for creating the policies for bereavement leave or other accommodations, adequately training management on best practices to support bereaved employees, and for creating a supportive and compassionate work environment.
- **Management** is responsible for enacting the policies, providing appropriate accommodations for bereaved employees' return to work, maintaining open dialogue about evolving needs or concerns throughout an employee's journey with grief, maintaining a supportive and compassionate team dynamic.
- **Individuals** can provide social support to colleagues, validate and recognize the bereaved employee's loss, and offer practical support with work responsibilities.

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Questions

Do you have questions or experiences you would like to share?

Poll

Has your knowledge level on today's topic increased because of this session?