

Reference document

Understanding and living through grief



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Introduction

When one or more employees are grieving, the entire workplace suffers. Several days after the loss, employees may still be in shock and unable to recognize the reality of their situation. Productivity can then be affected and the workplace may change, therefore affecting business operations.

Definition

Grief is a natural and personal reaction that results from a significant loss of a loved one. For example, with the death of a loved one, a person will experience pain and sadness. Other types of significant losses may also cause a grieving process such as a job loss, a spouse or a child leaving, illness, death of a pet, etc.

However, due to many factors involved, each person reacts in a very unique way when confronted with such feelings. In some cases, it will have minimal impact on functioning while in others, the grieving individual will become completely disorganized.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is a process that can take weeks, months or even years. However, there is a healthy way to cope with the pain and with time, it can allow a person to overcome grief.

Myths

It is important to dispel the several myths surrounding grief, such as:

- The pain will disappear more quickly if ignored.
- Returning to normal life necessitates forgetting the loved one.
- It is important to “be strong” when facing loss.
- Family and friends can help by avoiding the topic.
- Not crying means being insensitive.
- The duration and steps of grief are the same for everyone.

This conventional wisdom is false and can prevent individuals from experiencing their grief in a healthy way.

Stages and symptoms

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, grief is experienced in three stages by most people, even if the order of these steps is not always logical or predictable. These three steps are as follow:

- 1- Numbness or shock
- 2- Disorganization
- 3- Re-organization

Other researchers mention five or six stages, sometimes more. In any case, grieving people can move back and forth between stages several times. The average length of a grieving process is 18 months, but it is essential to know that this can vary depending on the individual and the kind of grief.

Following a significant and sudden loss it is not uncommon for a person to be in state of denial or to feel numbness. The person is then prone to becoming less functional for a certain period of time and may need time and help in order to regain a normal state.

Psychological symptoms associated with the loss of a loved one include shock, disbelief, sadness, guilt, anger and fear. Physical manifestations often include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- A weakened immune system
- Weight loss or gain
- Pain
- Insomnia

Healthy coping is when individuals give themselves the opportunity to grieve without losing sight of their responsibilities. They accept the pain and sorrow, let the grieving process run its course and know where to find support. This way they are able to better overcome grief and return to their normal life.

Unfortunately, **some individuals do not have the necessary coping or support mechanisms** to live through grief in a healthy way. The grieving process can then be impeded by slowing or blocking, by more intense or severe symptoms that can completely impair function, and by a pathological clinical course requiring specialized medical care.

It is therefore important to watch for signs suggesting self-destructive pain and not to hesitate to refer a person to a doctor. Here are a few example of these signs:

- Physical changes
- Substance abuse
- Social isolation
- Uncontrollable emotions

Differentiate grief from depression

Grief can easily be compared to a roller coaster with a wide range of emotions and a mix of good days and bad days. Thus, even when a person is in the middle of a grieving process, it is possible for them to have moments of pleasure or happiness. With major depression, the feeling of emptiness and despair are usually constant. Other symptoms also suggest major depression rather than grief:

- Intense and overwhelming feeling of guilt
- Suicidal thoughts or deeply concerned with death
- Feeling of uselessness
- Psychomotor slowing
- Incapable of functioning at work, at home or at school

- Hallucinations

How to overcome grief

Acceptance and support

An important part of the healing process starts with accepting the feelings that emerge following the loss and welcoming the offered support. It is therefore essential for the grieving person not to be alone with their pain. Instead, that person needs to express it, to share those emotions and to accept the support offered by others. Grieving individuals should be encouraged to turn to their family and, if the need arises, one should not hesitate to seek help through a support group, a counselor or a specialized therapist.

Self care

The stress of a significant loss can strongly affect a grieving person's energy level and emotional stability. For this reason, taking care of their physical and emotional needs will help them through these difficult times and prevent complications.

More specifically, in addition to recognizing and expressing their feelings, grieving people need to care for their health by maintaining good eating and sleeping habits, by staying active, by refusing to be dictated how they should be feeling and by being aware that some “triggers” (memories) related to grief are likely to revive the pain, such as anniversaries.

When grief becomes an illness

Without resources or without sufficient support, some people may experience pain so intense and constant that it prevents them from resuming their normal life. This could actually be a sign of a more serious problem such as a pathological grief or even a major depression. In addition to causing a prolonged absence from work, these two conditions may have a very negative and durable impact on the individuals, their friends and family. In such case, specialized care will need to be provided by a health care professional.

Conclusion

A significant loss, like the death of a loved one, will almost certainly trigger an emotional reaction of grief, whose characteristics and stages will vary from one individual to another. Some people will recover quickly thanks to their adaptive resources and their support network. Others, not so lucky to have the necessary resources or support, will experience more difficulties. Within an organization, the work environment as well as the productivity will inevitably be disrupted by this type of situation.

By being well informed about the grieving process, the most common manifestations and the ways to overcome them, managers will be able to provide better support to a grieving employee. Fortunately, those employees that feel supported are more likely to recover, thereby reducing the negative effects of grief on the organization.

The following resources can also be helpful in situation of grief:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Health *InSight* Support Services
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency