

# Grief in the Workplace

## *Baptist Burden Bearers*

### ***The Complexities of Workplace Grief***

Dealing with grief in the workplace can be a very complicated, sensitive and pivotal task. It's complicated because we don't know exactly how to react. It's sensitive because we don't want to appear to be uncaring. At the same time it's pivotal to our business operations because we have customers that still must be served. There are multiple aspects to cope with depending on the details of the situation. Even though there are numerous life events that result in grief it is the death of an employee or an employee's loved one that creates the greatest challenge when dealing with grief in the workplace.

### ***Company policies***

More and more companies are realizing the effects that grief has on the workplace. Considering the fact that employees are the most important asset to a company many of these businesses are modifying their bereavement leave policies in order to better serve the grieving employee. Many grief experts across the country are now recommending 20 days of bereavement leave for close family members. Recently Facebook and MasterCard began offering up to 20 days bereavement leave in the event of a family member's death.

### ***Don't ignore the death***

Almost all grieving people want ... and need ... to talk about their grief and what they have lost. When a grief event has occurred it can't be denied. When someone dies or a disaster hits it's a reality of life and must be dealt with. The problem comes when others such as co-workers and friends aren't comfortable about dealing with the grief. We don't know what to say or how to act so we decide that the best way to handle the situation is to avoid the grieving person or at least never bring up their loss. This only adds to their pain. Never avoid the bereaved. If nothing else at least give them a hug or a squeeze on the arm and just say nothing. They will get the message that you care.

### ***Production will be affected***

Our culture promotes the philosophy that the workplace is for work and personal issues need to be kept away from the job. We've all heard or even been told to "leave your personal problems at home" or "you can't let your personal issues affect your work". Regardless of the type of business that is involved you should expect that the normal production expectations will be impacted. When an employee returns to their job following the death of a child or after losing everything in a house fire their entire makeup is damaged. It is *impossible* for an employee to function at 100% in these instances and allowances must be made. The greatest asset of every business is their employees. When machinery or computers that we use on the job are damaged we have them checked out and get them properly serviced. If an employee incurs a major physical injury we make allowances for their work. The same allowances must be done for employees and co-workers that have been touched by grief.

### ***Expect mood and personality fluctuations***

In the same manner that we need to make allowances for work performance we need to realize that a bereaved worker will experience mood and personality changes. Everyone has good days and bad days when life is running along as normal. However, whenever you add grief to the mix you can expect the emotions to create a major challenge for the entire work area. Just be aware, be prepared and be patient with everyone.

### ***Both the grieving and their co-workers will all react differently***

Understanding that co-workers will experience emotional ups and downs doesn't mean that everyone will function the same. Just as people grieve differently they will also react differently with their work duties. Some may try to cope by *over working* while others may display an attitude of *irresponsibility*. Realize that both are a result of different people grieving differently.

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### ***Provide opportunities for remembering***

Part of the journey of recovering from grief is to embrace the object of your grief. Providing times of remembering can greatly enhance that part of the journey. Take time to share stories or memories of someone that has been lost. You could relate how they contributed to the team, how they really can't be replaced and how they are missed. Yes it can be painful. Grief is painful. However, just like ignoring someone who is grieving hurts rather than helps, the same is true for the memories. Avoiding them just suppresses the feelings and thoughts. Bringing them out into the open helps to move everyone further down their grief journey.

### ***Prepare for grief interruptions***

Grieving people are subject to what the grief support world refers to as *grief bursts*. These are episodes of overwhelming feelings of grief that can literally immobilize a person for a period of time. These occurrences can be as intense as they were when the grief event first happened. During these times it can be almost impossible for an employee to function as normal. They can't concentrate on their work. They may or may not want to talk with someone. They just want to cry or mourn or get away and be alone. It is during these moments that patience and understanding are vital in helping employees cope with their grief.

### ***Be cautious about relating other stories of grief***

Because it is normal to feel uncomfortable around grieved people we sometimes have a tendency to avoid the subject and not talk about someone's loss. It is just as true that sometimes we lean toward talking too much to try to help and we feel that we need to relate other stories of grief and loss and what people did to survive. While these stories are definitely beneficial to a grieved person's journey they must wait until the timing is right. It may be better to simply provide them with a book or links to online information that they can turn to when they are ready.

### ***Write little notes of love and encouragement***

One thing that helps greatly is to jot down a few words of encouragement and leave it for a grieving co-worker to read at their convenience. If a hand written note isn't feasible because of distance restraints or other policy issues a short email or text would serve the purpose. This could be something as simple as "*Thinking of you today*" or "*Prayed for you this morning*". This can be especially helpful around the anniversary dates of someone's loss. You could write something like "*I know this is a hard time of the year. Just know I'm always here for you*". You aren't trying to preach to them. You are letting them know you remember and you care.

### ***Provide scheduled times of group education, discussions and/or counseling***

As more companies start to provide grief support as an employee benefit the questions arises as to what is the best method that can be used to offer this benefit. The usual support comes in the form of a phone number or a counseling office that people can contact when needed. One negative aspect of this approach is that most people don't feel comfortable about reaching out for help when grieving. They feel like that would be admitting that they have a "problem" coping. Another issue is that grief is a life long journey not a single event. The event is the loss that created the grief. Grief then becomes the road they have to travel and many of the effects of grief don't surface until weeks, months or even years after an event. A great method to counteract this is to have periodic "educational" opportunities for employees to learn about grief *before* a major event occurs. This also allows employees to approach the subject as if they want to learn how to help *someone else* who might be grieving rather than learn how to help themselves.

### ***Be a compassionate friend first and an employee or supervisor next***

Grief is one of the rawest emotions that a person can experience. Grieving employees need to feel that they are part of a "family" and not simply a robot that is expected to perform. Be understanding. Be patient. Be a friend. Exhibiting the "golden rule" helps everyone to make the workplace a safe place.