

# Grief At Work

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A Guide  
For  
Employees  
and  
Managers





This booklet is for anyone affected by loss. If you are grieving, the first two sections are especially for you.

If you are a manager, understanding these sections, as well as the specific advice for you that follows, will help you deal effectively and compassionately with workplace grief.



## *grief at work*

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Grief is the normal and natural response to loss, a universal human experience. More than 8 million people will be directly affected by a death this year; most of them will be in the workplace during the grieving period. Millions more will grieve other important losses — relationships, homes, jobs.

Although we try to establish healthy boundaries between our work and personal lives, we know the importance of jobs and co-workers. For many, work provides a sense of community. For some, it even feels like family. Employees often derive their sense of well-being from their work.

Every workplace must deal with complex emotional issues. The more difficult emotions, like grief, can disturb workers and diminish the work environment. Co-workers want to do the right thing but are not sure how to do it. Meanwhile, managers and employees may feel pressured and anxious, knowing the work must still get done. It's no wonder that we need help in working through grief.

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## *what is it like to grieve?*

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Grief is experienced on many levels. We know that grief can be responsible for physical symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, fatigue or actual illness. Grief affects the way our minds work — how we see the world and ourselves. During times of loss, it's the filter through which we receive information and make decisions.

**There is no time limit on grief.**

The most obvious effects of grief are on our feelings. Almost all emotions can be part of a grief reaction, and they may be experienced with dizzying speed and intensity. Fear, depression, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of our grief. There is no order or scale by which to measure these emotions. There is no time limit on grief.

If faith is a part of our lives, it can be a source of comfort as we grieve. But we may also question how this loss fits with our beliefs. It may feel like prayers have been unanswered or we are cut off from our source of strength. When we need it most, we may struggle with what we've believed for a long time.

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While we wade through these thoughts and feelings, we must also cope with the busy life that continues around us. We may feel angry that the world won't slow down for a moment, that it doesn't even seem to take notice of this shattering event in our lives. It might bother us when we see others enjoying life.

It hurts when others don't mention the loss — and sometimes it hurts when they do. We need some time alone to get our bearings, or we may wish to regain our identity by resuming our routine, even plunging into activities that keep us too busy to feel.

It's easy to see why grieving people wonder if they're normal. Our understanding of grief is incomplete and each human being is very different. There's no right way to grieve and

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no shortcut around it. But grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on.

Grief may never go away, but it will change. And we change, too; we are

never the same again. We can find new ways of feeling, working and believing. The loss and its meaning become part of life, and this new life can be healthy and happy.



## *i don't know what to expect*

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### Suggestions for those who grieve

If you've been carrying your grief to work each day, or if you're returning to the job after a loss, you may be wondering how you're going to get through this time. You might even wonder how you're going to get through the rest of your life.

You now have two "jobs." You have responsibilities to your employer and this job is important to you. But the work of grief is just as important. It can't be put aside or ignored; the only way past grief is to move through it. Grief is hard and lonely work, but you can find comfort and guidance along the way.

## Taking Care of Yourself

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- ❖ Don't expect too much of yourself. Do things because you can, not because you should. Accept offers of help.
- ❖ Ask your supervisor or human resources office about your company's bereavement leave policies and other programs that can help you through this time.
- ❖ Take control of seemingly small things: who to be with, when to write a letter, what to put off until later. When life seems out of control, we begin to reclaim it a little at a time.

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- ❖ Important items can wait. The grieving period is no time to make big decisions, like selling a home or switching jobs. Give yourself time before you make any changes that can alter the rest of your life.
  - ❖ Eat wisely and sleep well to heal your body, mind and spirit.
  - ❖ Time is your friend. Make sure that you take time to rest, to be with people who support you, and to be alone with your thoughts.
  - ❖ Decide that you will survive these intense emotions. Don't turn away from painful sadness or anger because you're afraid of "losing it." Locate a quiet place and let yourself go; you can "find it" again.
  - ❖ Pay special attention to your needs during holiday seasons or important anniversaries. Just when you're beginning to feel better, your grief feelings may come flooding back. Honor your memories and acknowledge the loss with traditions that recall happy moments. Be sure to make time to remember.



# *i don't know what to expect*

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## Getting Back to Work

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- ❖ Decide how private you need to be, and tell your supervisor. Many people feel supported by engagement with others, but it's okay to ask that only one person in the office coordinate co-workers' good intentions.
- ❖ Talk with your supervisor about your hours. You may be more tired than you know, and a temporary schedule adjustment might help.
- ❖ Expect feelings to emerge out of nowhere, so ask your supervisor about a private place to gather your thoughts. Speak up when you need a few moments alone.
- ❖ Don't let your work overwhelm you. Your supervisor may be able to shift some of your workload for a short time.
- ❖ Speak to your supervisor or your human resources manager if you need more help in coping with your feelings. An important part of their job is the well-being of employees. They can suggest other resources and respect confidentiality. Find out what your company can do for you.

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## Connecting With Others

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- ❖ Now or later, you'll want to talk about your experience. Find at least one good listener. Telling your story is an important part of the healing work of grief. Listening is the best gift that anyone can give you.
- ❖ Expect that people won't always say the right thing (if there is a right thing). They may be as inexperienced at offering help as you are at grieving. Accept that they mean well.
- ❖ Your loss will remind others of their own losses. Some people may become tearful or want to share their stories with you. Listening may bring comfort, but if it's more than you can bear, say so.
- ❖ If spiritual values and traditions have been meaningful to you, speak with a clergy member or a friend who shares your beliefs. Make room for your faith to be part of the grieving process.

After good days and bad days, missed occasions, funny moments and quiet recognition, you'll see an unreliable rhythm to your feelings. This is what's normal for you and no one else. Eventually, you'll realize that you're able to concentrate more on the world around you and less on your feelings of grief. Healing is happening. The emotions may come and go for a long time, but you'll know that your life, though changed, will go on.



## *how can i help?*

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### Ideas for managers

As a manager, your first responsibility is getting the job done. You see that deadlines are met, that you stay within budget, and that your employees have a safe and productive environment. As a good manager, you care that your workers feel supported and valued, and that they can contribute to your company's success. You know that this balance can be hard to find.

When a co-worker or a person you supervise is grieving, when an employee is seriously ill, and certainly when an employee dies, the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict. The suggestions offered here will help, but seek additional support if you need it. Consider more in-depth training for supervisors and managers so that all will be prepared for managing workplace grief. The American Hospice Foundation has a manual to guide you; see [www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org). Other resources are discussed later.

## Understanding Your Role

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- ❖ Know your company's pertinent policies and programs so you can offer appropriate support.
- ❖ If the employee has not returned to work after the loss, stay in touch. Co-workers may be doing so, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch, as well.

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- ❖ Remember that this grief is necessary and not something to “snap out of.” Create an environment where grief work can progress.
  - ❖ If your company has an employee assistance program (EAP), familiarize yourself with the help it can offer. Make sure your HR office can provide a list of community resources, as well.
  - ❖ Set an example. Your caring support and professionalism lets everyone know that your company stands by its employees and encourages others to do so.
  - ❖ Read all of this booklet. Make it available to others.
  - ❖ Make sure that you take care of yourself, too. You have a lot on your shoulders.

## Talking to a Grieving Employee

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Before the employee returns to work, ask how you can help. Questions you might ask are:

- ❖ *Would you like me — or someone else — to share any information with the others?*
- ❖ *What information and details do you want others to know?*
- ❖ *Do you want to talk about your experience or would you prefer to concentrate on your work?*
- ❖ *What are your needs for time? Privacy? Help with your work?*

Listen carefully. The answers to these questions may change each day as emotions swirl. Keep asking, keep listening.



## *how can i help?*

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- ❖ Acknowledge loss and grief. Don't wait until the right thing to say comes to you. There is no right thing. The wrong thing is to say nothing.
- ❖ Personalize what you say. "We've talked about how much our families mean to us. I'm so sorry about Ed's death." Shared feelings communicate more than good advice.
- ❖ Avoid comparisons. "I know just how you feel, because my brother Jim died recently, too." What you know is how you felt, but we never really know another's feelings. Everyone's relationships and reactions are unique.
- ❖ Offer specific help. Many people are too tired or numb to decide what help they need and co-workers may want to help with meals, transportation, childcare. You can coordinate those gestures.
- ❖ Expect to hear the story told, again and again. Telling the story is a part of healing. You need to speak up if the time isn't right. "Gerry, I'm sorry I can't talk with you right now. Let's continue this over coffee this afternoon."
- ❖ If you're uncomfortable, say so. "Gina, what you're saying is important. I'd like to help you find a better listener for these memories, because listening is difficult for me right now." Set limits.

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- ❖ A touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone — but do ask permission before you hold a hand or offer a hug.
  - ❖ Holidays and anniversaries are especially difficult for the grieving. Ask what you can do to provide extra support at these times.

## Balancing Compassion and Responsibilities

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- ❖ Respect privacy. You may be hearing personal and privileged information that should not be repeated. Honor closed doors and quiet moments.
- ❖ Expect tears. Like the rest of grieving, they're a normal part of healing.
- ❖ Watch out for other employees; vivid memories and feelings may surface. Some unspoken grief may become noticeable.
- ❖ Include the grieving employee in social plans. It's easy to assume that he or she won't feel up to it, but a lighthearted outing may be a great help to someone who is feeling isolated.
- ❖ When tasks need to be re-distributed, thank staff members for their extra effort. They're sharing both the emotional burden and the additional work.



## *how can i help?*

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- ❖ Support the efforts of others to help the employee. This sad time can be an opportunity to increase staff awareness of mutual support, teamwork, and the values that are part of your work together.
- ❖ Expect the best from grieving employees — they need to know you have confidence in them — but accept less than the best for a while. You can do both.

## **When an Employee is Seriously Ill**

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- ❖ Check sick leave and other policies that deal with the employee's practical concerns.
- ❖ Keep in contact. Regular phone calls to the home or hospital say, "you're still part of the team."
- ❖ Make sure you know what you can share and what is confidential. Honor those wishes even if you disagree with them.
- ❖ Make plans to continue calls, notes and other gestures of support. These contacts can be reassuring to sick employees and their co-workers alike.

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## When an Employee Dies

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The death of a co-worker seems devastating. This loss is felt in many different ways, depending on relationships with the person who died. The suggestions already offered are important, but consider these additional steps.

- ❖ Call an informal meeting. Give permission to grieve and to talk about feelings. If a death was sudden, accidental or violent, schedule additional times to talk.
- ❖ Bring in help if you need it. Your employee assistance program, community crisis intervention team, or local hospice can send a trained professional to work with staff or suggest additional help.
- ❖ Make certain that affected employees know of funeral and memorial arrangements, and that they have time to attend.
- ❖ Honor the person who died in an appropriate way. Collect money for a charitable donation, create a memorial book or bulletin board, or share a tribute in employee newsletters.



## *there's more help available*

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### Resources for grief support

Since there's no single standard for grieving, it can be hard to tell if you're making progress. Whether you are grieving a loss or managing a workplace affected by grief, the advice and reassurance of experienced counselors may help.

How do you know if it's time to ask for help? There is no wrong time and there doesn't need to be an emergency. It may be valuable just to hear that what's happening is normal.

Perhaps you're aware that fatigue or feelings of isolation seem to be deepening, or you notice physical changes. If the normal grief emotions discussed in this booklet seem extreme — if they feel consuming or unmanageable — talking with a counselor can help.

*Certainly if feelings of profound sadness lead you to worry about your safety, or if you have this concern about someone else, you should ask for help without delay.*

- ❖ The hospices in your area have counselors who are trained in grief work. Hospices care for patients and families who face life-limiting illness, and they continue to care for these families and friends after a death. Hospices usually offer their bereavement services to the community, as well. They have individual or group counseling, workshops on topics related to grief, and can also recommend other helpful services in your area.

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- ❖ Many businesses have arrangements with area healthcare and social service organizations for additional employee support. Employee assistance programs provide short-term help that is usually free to the employee and is always confidential. Managers and human resource offices can tell employees how to contact the EAP.
  - ❖ Community mental health agencies often have counseling available by appointment, or may have walk-in clinics. In some communities, they also offer telephone advice lines.
  - ❖ Many private therapists — counselors, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists — understand the issues of grief. Ask about their experience in this field when you make the appointment. Health insurance frequently covers their services.
  - ❖ Clergy of all faiths may have additional training in pastoral counseling. If your religious beliefs are important to you, find out if this help is available.
  - ❖ Many communities have critical incident stress management teams to help in crises. Knowledge of these teams should be part of management's crisis planning. See [www.icisf.org](http://www.icisf.org) for more information.

Remember, asking for help has nothing to do with being sick or in trouble. Asking for help reflects your decision to work through grief.



# *american hospice foundation*

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*Grief at Work* is a publication of the American Hospice Foundation. This national organization serves terminally ill and grieving Americans, voicing their concerns and opening new doors to hospice care.

The American Hospice Foundation offers on-site training programs on grief at work, grief at school, and a variety of publications on grief and hospice care. For further details, contact the Foundation at the address below.

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**Each gift helps open new  
doors to hospice care.**

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