

COPING WITH GRIEF in the WORKPLACE

Adapted from “Healing Grief at Work” by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD.
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1. Acknowledge that the workplace is also a grieving place.

During your workday, you are not a different person than you are outside of work. Because of the very nature of grief, the workplace is a grieving place. Just as the workplace is a place for celebrating birthdays, commiserating about parenting issues, and sharing opinions about virtually everything, it's a place for grieving, and for supporting each other in grief.

What do you need at work to help you in your grief?

2. Overcome destructive misconceptions about grief and mourning.

Grief is what the griever feels inside. Mourning is the expression of those thoughts and feelings. You have probably internalized many of our society's harmful misconceptions about grief and mourning. Here are some to overcome: *Mourners need to be strong and carry on. Tears are a sign of weakness. People need to “get over” their grief. The workplace isn't a place for sadness. Death isn't something we talk about, especially at work. If someone is grieving, the best thing to do is leave them alone. You can't help someone else with their grief.* Sometimes these misconceptions will cause you to feel guilty about or ashamed of your true feelings. Grief and mourning are normal and necessary — allow it to be what it is and break through these misconceptions to help yourself as well as others.

Which grief misconception do you identify with most strongly?

How can you help teach others about these misconceptions?

3. Recognize the emotions of grief.

People in grief often experience a wide arrange of emotion. Some of the most common emotions in grief include: shock and numbness, disorientation and confusion, anxiety and fear, explosive emotions, such as anger, blame and resentment, guilt and regret, sadness, relief and release. As strange as some of these emotions may seem, they are common and they are true. They are what they are. No emotion is right or wrong, and they all are deserving of attention and respect.

Which emotions have you experienced as part of grief in your life?

4. Recognize the physical symptoms of grief.

When people are in grief, their bodies often take on some of the stress of the experience. This stress can lead to common bodily symptoms, such as: troubles with sleeping, low energy, muscle aches and pains, shortness of breath, tightness in the throat or chest, digestive problems, heart palpitations, nausea, headaches, changes in appetite, weight loss or gain. The “lethargy of grief” often causes mourners to feel exhausted and chronically low in energy. In addition, pre-existing or chronic health problems can become more pronounced during times of grief.

Which physical symptoms of grief have you experienced?

How are you taking care of yourself physically?

5. Recognize the cognitive effects of grief.

Grief affects our ability to think, absorb information, make decisions and reason logically. Often, grief causes mourners' minds to return to the circumstances of the death and the surreal reality of the death over and over again. At times, it's as if they can't stop thinking about the loss. Even when they are not consciously thinking about the death, their subconscious minds can be absorbed with trying to acknowledge the new reality of life without the person who died. Cognitive difficulties such as these are normal and temporary.

What cognitive effects of grief have you noticed in your life?

6. Know that grief does not proceed in orderly, predictable stages.

Mourners often experience a multitude of different emotions in a wave-like fashion. They also typically experience several grief related emotions at the same time.

*What are you currently experiencing in your grief process?
How has this changed over time?*

7. Believe in the power of story.

A vital part of healing in grief is often “telling the story”. Some people need to talk about the person who died, what happened, and how it has affected them. Others prefer to keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves. If you need to talk about what happened, find someone who can listen without judgement. If you need privacy, let the people around you know that you aren’t ready to talk.

Who can you talk to about your grief?

8. Be on the lookout for disenfranchised grief.

When a person experiences a death that is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or is not socially acceptable, we say that their grief is disenfranchised. In the case of workplace death, people may feel that they don’t have a right to grieve over the loss because they weren’t close to the person who died. This can be disenfranchise grief. A death in the workplace impacts a wide range of people regardless of their personal connection to the person who died. This is especially true if the death occurred in traumatic circumstances.

Have you noticed anyone downplaying their grief or feeling that they don’t have a right to their grief?

9. Know that your workplace is forever changed.

Grief changes us. Who we were before a death is different from who we are after a death. After a death touches your workplace, it will never be quite the same as it was before. If a coworker has died, you may always feel their absence. Just as we incorporate new babies, new friends and new colleagues into our lives, we also incorporate the absence when someone leaves us. This give and take is what, in many ways, defines our lives.

*How has your workplace changed?
How have you incorporated this loss into your work life?*

10. Understand the needs of mourning.

There are several needs which need to be address while mourning:

- Acknowledge the reality of the death — it may take weeks or months to fully comprehend the loss.
- Embrace the pain of the loss — allow yourself to be present with the emotions related to your loss.
- Remember the person who died — allow yourself to remember stories and share memories.
- Develop a new self-identify — grief can change how we define ourselves in relation to others.
- Search for meaning — loss may lead us to question the meaning and purpose of life and death.
- Receive ongoing support from others — grief is a process, not an event, and mourners need the continued support of family, friends, and colleagues as this process unfolds over time.

*How are you addressing the needs of mourning?
What is helpful for you in your grief process?*

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