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The Question

By Dr. Bill Webster

of Grief

Grief can be confusing. When anyone we care about dies, we find it hard to believe what has happened, often feeling muddled and disoriented, with thoughts like “this is impossible ... it cannot be ... it isn’t real.”

In such a situation we may know the person has died, but we just can’t believe they are gone! That may seem like a contradiction, but it is a reality to people going through the experience. Losing someone special is one of the most difficult and unwelcome events of life.

What makes grief even more challenging is that some people give us conflicting messages, using clichés like “You have to be strong. Try not to be emotional. You ought to pull yourself together. Get on with it. Just try to forget it.” Sadly, that is not what a grieving person experiences.

Others, with good intentions admittedly, try to give us advice on how to handle things. “Here’s what you should do to deal with the situation,” providing strategies and ideas on coping with grief.

The drawback is that much of the advice is based on the false notion that when we are grieving, the goal is to “get over it” – and as quickly as possible. How many of you have heard the comment, “It’s been three months, you ought to be over it by now”? But we don’t get over it; we have to go through it. And how long does that take? My answer is “it always takes longer than people who haven’t been through it seem to think.”


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Here’s the problem. In a culture that doesn’t like to talk or even think about death or dying, we have come to regard grief as an inconvenient experience that we have to resist and eventually overcome. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grief is needed for our body, mind and soul to survive and heal.

So the question of grief is not how, what, when, where or who. The real question of grief is “why?” Following are a few important truths about grief.

A) GRIEF IS AN UNWELCOME EXPERIENCE

While loss is inevitable in this life, no one welcomes the experience. People who have lost someone they loved would much rather be anywhere else and they are not happy about what has occurred to change



their world. The experience of grief is always difficult. And because the process is more emotional and long lasting than ever anticipated, people wonder if they are ever going to get through it, which is never a happy thought.

B) GRIEF IS A NATURAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE

I hold an unshakable conviction that grief is a “normal reaction to an unwelcome event.” It is not a sickness or disease, nor should it be considered a mental health disorder. Grief is not a disorder. It is the normal, human response to a significant loss. However, we must be careful to “normalize” but not “minimize.” Losing someone you care about is one of life’s most difficult and challenging experiences. We must never be tempted to think that because it is normal it can be dismissed or underestimated.

Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign we cared. Grief is the price we pay for love. People may encourage us to “be strong” or “not to cry.” But how sad it would be if someone we cared about died and we didn’t cry or we carried on as if nothing had happened. Frankly, I’d like to think someone would miss me enough to shed a tear after I’m gone. Wouldn’t you?

C) GRIEF IS A UNIQUELY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Every individual is unique, in looks, character, gender, age, family background, cultural diversity, as well as in human experiences. There are also many losses, and the people who experience those bereavements are all different.

Not only is it important to differentiate the loss of a spouse from the loss of a child, parent, sibling, family member or friend – all of which have their own unique stresses and challenges – it is also vital to recognize that even within these broad categories there are many different situations.

Every relationship is unique. Some are longer lasting, more interactive and happier than others. Sadly, some relationships are more ambivalent. The legal definition of the relationship (spouse, parent, child, friend, etc.) is just the beginning of the diversity. Just

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because two people have similar losses, why should we expect their grief reactions to be similar?

We will be grieving what we miss about that unique relationship we have lost with this individual. Yet somehow, society seems to expect every person in every situation to grieve in exactly the same way? But there is no neat, orderly, cookie-cutter way to understand grief. I believe this is one of the most seriously overlooked facts about grief.

D) GRIEF IS AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. Because it is an emotion, it is difficult to describe. The Scots have a saying that some things are better “felt than tell’t” (told). Grief is one of these things.

People need to find the courage to go through this painful experience of grief knowing that what they are experiencing is normal, and the process they are going through, though possibly different from what others may have experienced, is in fact them doing what they need to do to heal.

Understanding “why” we grieve is one of the keys to recovery. Grief is not a sign of weakness; it is the healing process that helps us live beyond the loss that has touched our lives. The way out of grief is through it.

As Helen Keller says, “The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door.”



DANGER: *Grief at Work*

By Dr. Bill Webster

It became obvious in January that Ken was losing his four-year battle with cancer. Connie, his wife of over 30 years, took her vacation month from work, and then an additional five-week leave of absence to be with him every agonizing day in the hospital. On March 17, Ken died.

Connie returned to work two weeks later. With her Irish determination and “stiff upper lip” approach, she shut down her feelings, masking the pain of a broken heart. Customers and fellow workers alike thought she was strong and “doing fine.”

In fact, she was not fine. Five months later, Connie experienced an emotional explosion. The grief she had bottled up inside emerged with a rush. She was totally overwhelmed, not only by the intense, uncontrollable feelings of loss, but also by the “shame” of “losing it.” Depression, fear, confusion, crying and despair swept over her in waves.

Connie was unable to handle customers without falling apart. People were shocked, especially “after so long” when it had appeared she was doing well. Her employers, not sure what was actually going on with her, faced a dilemma. Though concerned about their longtime employee, they were worried about the effect it was having on her productivity, co-workers and customers.

This is grief at work. Bereavement is a devastating experience. The grieving person faces an emotionally rocky journey. While we affirm that grief is normal, it is nonetheless troublesome, and often

leaves people like Connie unable to function at work within acceptable limits. Long after the funeral is over, the impact of the loss can hit home. Months later, our efficiency, equilibrium, health and well-being can be compromised, which affects every area of life, including our work.

Much as we would like to subscribe to the concept of a compassionate society, the real world can be cruel. Workplace expectations are that the employee will perform and produce, devoid of human emotions and unaffected by personal experiences.

Yet, if bereavement produces an unavoidable emotional response, a conflict between the needs of the individual and the goals of the workplace seems inevitable.

Many companies recognize death as an acceptable cause for absence from work. Some give a week or more off to help employees cope with the loss of a loved one, although there is often a hierarchy of loss – three days for immediate family members, ranging down to one day for other relatives or friends.

An understanding of the grief process indicates people are generally in a state of shock and numbness in the immediate days after a loss. Confusing strength and numbness, some feel support and sympathy can be withdrawn shortly after the event. We expect or hope people will just “get on with it.”

Yet, most manifestations of grief do not appear until weeks or months after the event. Because there is not



much understanding of what happens, this reaction often catches both the individual and the employer by surprise.

Over time, the bereaved employee may experience troubling symptoms: inability to concentrate; lack of motivation; impaired decision-making; confusion; memory gaps; anxiety; crying; social withdrawal; apathy; decreasing productivity; and other seemingly inappropriate emotional responses. These are all the more bewildering because they are often uncharacteristic of the person. As a result of these normal albeit dysfunctional responses, employees often have a high absentee, sickness and accident rate in the months after the loss.

Because of the effect a troubled employee has on productivity, which is after all the bottom line in business, many companies have responded with employee assistance programs (EAPs) that can address issues such as substance abuse, marital and emotional problems, and play a significant part in helping employees cope with personal loss.

Every manager or executive will eventually be confronted with a death in the workplace. There is a need for information to enable them to understand the grief process and thus understand the reactions of the grieving employee. Such understanding will enable

the workplace to become more accommodating to the needs of their people. A few days of funeral leave only begins to address the grieving individual's needs. The full impact of grief is felt long after the funeral.

Grief is not a mental health disorder, which means it is often not identified as something that can be "covered" by assistance programs. But just because it cannot be "codified" does not mean that it not be treated as a serious challenge to a person's well-being.

The ability to identify employees experiencing grief and loss and refer them to the appropriate resources can be vital to the well-being of the work climate as well as to the individual.

Loss is a fact of life. Grief is the reaction to any loss, and must be worked through in order to heal. But healing takes time, often much longer than people expect. Most people do not have the opportunity or the financial luxury of taking an extended leave of absence. Usually they must keep on working while they are putting their lives together. Finding energy to do both can be a challenge. With the support of managers and knowledgeable co-workers, much can be done to get people through this stressful time, and thus dramatically reduce non-productive behaviours.

Connie attended a grief support group organized by her local funeral home, and sought out grief counselling, some of which was covered by her company benefits. It was a long journey, and she had a struggle to come to terms with her loss, but with help, she was eventually able to return to work as before.

But as she herself put it, "I had to take time to be a mess!" The opportunity to do so gave her the message that she was important to her company and to her friends, and that people were willing to support her through the most challenging experience of her life.

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