



Grief in the Workplace: The Bereaved Business

- By Melanie Temple, BSW

Before continuing to read this article, go to www.google.com; type in “the cost of grief in the workplace” and hit the ‘enter’ button. You are likely to find *many* articles quoting the cost of grief and bereavement for the corporate sector. The most reliable study, conducted by the Grief Recovery Institute, estimated that each year grief costs American companies more than \$75 billion dollars. Researchers calculated the effect of grief in the workplace by assuming that each death produces one primary mourner, who will lose a total of thirty days of productivity. Loss of productivity includes increased errors, accidents, time away from the office and sick leave. The term grief, as utilized in this study, includes: death of a loved one, divorce/marital problems, family crisis, death of an acquaintance, personal financial troubles, and pet loss. The Grief Institute calculated how much each type of loss costs the United States each year; the death of a loved one accounts for \$37.6 billion....an incredible, almost unthinkable amount of money! The reality is, grief affects our ability to work. Though the cost is great, it doesn’t actually surprise me. We live in a society that actively and intentionally ignores and avoids grief. Even a simple conversation on the topic of death or grief is often met by cringing, uncomfortable faces. There are very few supportive services available to grieving individuals, and the result is evident (\$75 billion dollars of evidence, in fact).

Unfortunately, most work environments are not conducive to open conversations about grief and bereavement. Furthermore, since it is such a taboo subject – there is a lack of good grief information. This is evidenced by unrealistic bereavement policies. Most businesses offer three to five days bereavement leave for the death of an immediate family member. Anyone who has had an immediate family member die knows that three to five business days is barely enough time to organize a funeral, let alone return to work in a productive and efficient manner. Bereaved employees may feel ignored, unsupported, overworked or overwhelmed. Many [although not all] may also have higher rates of absenteeism, decreased productivity, increased use of social services, etc. Since most businesses are profit-driven, it is actually a sound investment to provide supportive services to grieving employees. Studies show that individuals with healthy coping strategies are better able to endure the stress of grief and bereavement. Unfortunately, since we are not ‘taught’ how to grieve, what to expect (etc., etc., etc.) – it is necessary to provide good education and supportive services to grieving employees. The costs of grief in the workplace can be mitigated by educating workplaces about grief and bereavement, developing more realistic bereavement policies, and providing personnel with the resources and supports needed to learn to live with their own (or a co-workers) grief.

One of the first steps to educating workplaces about bereavement, is to provide reasonable expectations about grief. The grief process is fundamentally unique, and each person will experience and display it differently. However, you can expect that:

- “Grief will take longer than you think it should.
- [Grieving] will take more energy than you can imagine.
- [Grieving] will show itself in all areas of life: social, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.
- [They] will grieve for many things. [They] will grieve for what [they] have lost as well as for the future; for the hopes and dreams and unfulfilled expectations [they had] for and with that person.

- [They] may experience trouble thinking, concentrating and making decisions.
- [They] may feel like [they] are going crazy.
- [They] may be [preoccupied] with death or ... with thoughts of the dead person.
- [They] will have a number of physical reactions.
- Certain dates, events, seasons and reminders will bring upsurges in ... grief long after the death has occurred.
- Society will have unrealistic expectations about ... mourning and may respond inappropriately. “
(Rando, 1998)

Developing realistic bereavement policies is a difficult task, and is not always possible. However, there are other proactive measures workplaces can take. For example,

- Ensure all managers/supervisors are in touch with their employees. Some employees will not feel comfortable sharing the news when a death occurs. The more *you* know, the better you can help.
- Develop a plan to inform personnel in case a coworker dies (i.e. how to inform them, how much information to share, opportunities for memorials, etc.)
- When dealing with the loss of an employee, have a Crisis Management Plan. Have telephone numbers for Crisis Response Teams (especially if the death occurs onsite), grief counselors, and Bereaved Families.
- Decide ahead of time which types of memorials are appropriate for your company (i.e. tree planting, financial donation to charity, work events, etc.)
- Peer Mentoring: Hallmark Cards Inc., offers a program called Compassionate Connections, a support network of employees who have faced a personal crisis and mentor people now weathering similar experiences. Eighty-five Hallmark employees have volunteered to be mentors to 5,400 co-workers. Mentors list a specific crisis -- Alzheimer's, childhood illnesses, AIDS, infertility, house fire, etc. -- that they have faced.
- Flexible Conversions: at Foote Hospital in Jackson, Mich., employees lobbied for a program that now allows workers to convert vacation or personal time to cash, which is then used to offset lost income for co-workers who take time off to deal with a crisis.

Providing personnel with resources and supports for grieving coworkers does not have to be the sole responsibility of the management team. In response to the challenges of grief in the workplace, Bereaved Families of Ontario – Halton/Peel has developed a new program called “Lunch and Learn”. It is an effective method of educating employees and employers about grief and bereavement. Our program is designed to provide bereaved employees with skills and strategies for coping with grief as well as to teach non-bereaved employees how to support grieving co-workers and/or clients. BFO-HP can provide you a copy of our Lunch and Learn workshop content with information about grief and bereavement, coping strategies, ideas for memorials, strategies for management, etc. Here are just a few tidbits of information about grief in the workplace from our Lunch and Learn workshop:

- 85% of management-level decision makers said their decisions were adversely affected in the weeks or months following the grief incident. Of those, 60% indicated that some of their decisions had a negative financial impact on the company (Lake County Business Journal, 2008).

- "When your heart is broken, your head doesn't work right," says Russell Friedman, the institute's co-director. He advocates that businesses offer more grief counseling, longer bereavement leaves, and more education on the topic (Wallstreet Journal, 2002).
- Counselors interviewed more than 25,000 grieving people, and almost all said their job performance was adversely affected (Sherman Oaks Institute).
- A survey in 2000 indicated that 14% of employees had taken bereavement leave within a 12 month period.

Our program is three 50-minute sessions in length (usually held over the lunch-hour). The purpose of our Lunch and Learn program is three-fold:

- To provide social service and corporate sectors the support and education necessary to effectively address issues of grief and bereavement within the workplace.
- To provide employees with strategies and coping skills that may ease the burden of grief.
- To provide employers and management teams with reasonable expectations of their employees, guide the development of realistic policies and procedures, and provide strategies for returning to, or maximizing productivity.

For more information about grief in the workplace, or to inquire about our Lunch and Learn program – please contact Melanie Temple at Programming@BereavedFamilies.ca or 905-848-4337.

Information from

"Grief in the Workplace: A guide for managers" The Hospice Council. 1996.

[Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies by Theresa A. Rando](#)