



Grief and Trauma

On-site Support



Ulliance
Enhancing People. Improving Business.

“ *Because people bring more to work than just their cell phones* ”

The Difference Between Grief and Trauma

It's important to recognize the difference between the experience of loss or bereavement and a traumatic experience, as individual responses to these vary.

If we lose one of our co-workers to natural causes while he or she is at home, the reaction is grief. Grief and sadness are normal responses to a loss or bereavement, and most people have experienced these feelings before. Most of us who experience grief and loss will likely be able to process these feelings and draw on coping skills we already possess to get through it. Tears and sadness aren't signs that we're reacting negatively or "abnormally" – they are normal reactions to the loss.

On the other hand, if we lost one of our co-workers due to traumatic circumstances, or we directly witness the death of a co-worker, this could result in a trauma response. It is not the event itself but how we personalize it that dictates if we will experience trauma. With trauma, feelings of anxiety and fear need to be addressed along with other feelings, like sadness. When we experience trauma, we are at higher risk for concerns like absenteeism/isolation, substance use issues, and problematic behavioral issues, like uncontrollable anger.



Below are some signs and symptoms related to both grief and trauma. Keep in mind that there are as many ways to process loss and trauma as there are people in the world. But if you are experiencing a majority of these symptoms, it would probably be in your best interest to seek outside help. If you are experiencing some of the more serious physical symptoms (chest pains, dizziness, difficulty breathing), reach out to a physician immediately.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral	Thought
Nausea, upset stomach	Anxiety	Crying	Intrusive images
Headaches	Survivor guilt	Withdrawal	Nightmares
Diarrhea	Grief	Hyper-vigilance	Flashbacks
Tremors (lips, hands)	Depression/despair	Sleep disturbances	Difficulty concentrating
Chills	Fear, panic	Changes in food intake	Disbelief
Muscle aches	Anger	Startle reactions	Blaming self or others
Chest pain- see a physician!	Identifying with victim(s)	Changes in communicating	Decreased attention
Disorientation	Feeling powerless	Antisocial	Difficulty making decisions
Elevated BP	Feeling lost, abandoned	Increased alcohol use	Poor problem solving
Fatigue	Irritability	Excessive silence	Denial
Rapid heartbeat	Feeling isolated	Excessive humor	Increased worry
Difficulty breathing	Feeling numb	Changes in behavior	Confusion
Dizziness	Loss of motivation	Changes in activity	Slowed thinking
Changes in appetite	Feeling overwhelmed	Inability to relax	Memory problems
Profuse sweating			Suspiciousness

What We Need During Grief

▶ We need time.

When we are first made aware of a loss, we need time to immediately process the news with those around us. When we experience the loss of a co-worker, it is normal and healthy to debrief informally with our colleagues. Additionally, we may need time off from work depending on the situation and time to attend the funeral or memorial service if we desire to do so.

▶ We need to remember.

We may also benefit from an employer-organized plan to honor and remember the deceased. People like to “do” something following a death. Having something to do gives us something helpful to focus on. Some ideas might be a small ceremony where memories are shared or a slideshow at an all-staff meeting. Perhaps creating a memorial – hanging a plaque, planting a tree, or naming a conference room after the deceased are all easy ways to do something.

▶ How long will I have these feelings?

Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all” answer to this question. For some losses, the grief process can last a lifetime – this does not mean that a person will be inconsolably sad for the rest of their lives. Rather, it means that a person may be struck from time to time with powerful feelings of remembrance and sorrow for the person they lost. How strong and how often we feel these types of feelings will vary.

If an individual is experiencing severe problems in their personal relationships and in the workplace over a substantial period following a significant loss it may be indicative of a more complex kind of grief which requires a higher level of care. This would be the time to seek professional assistance.

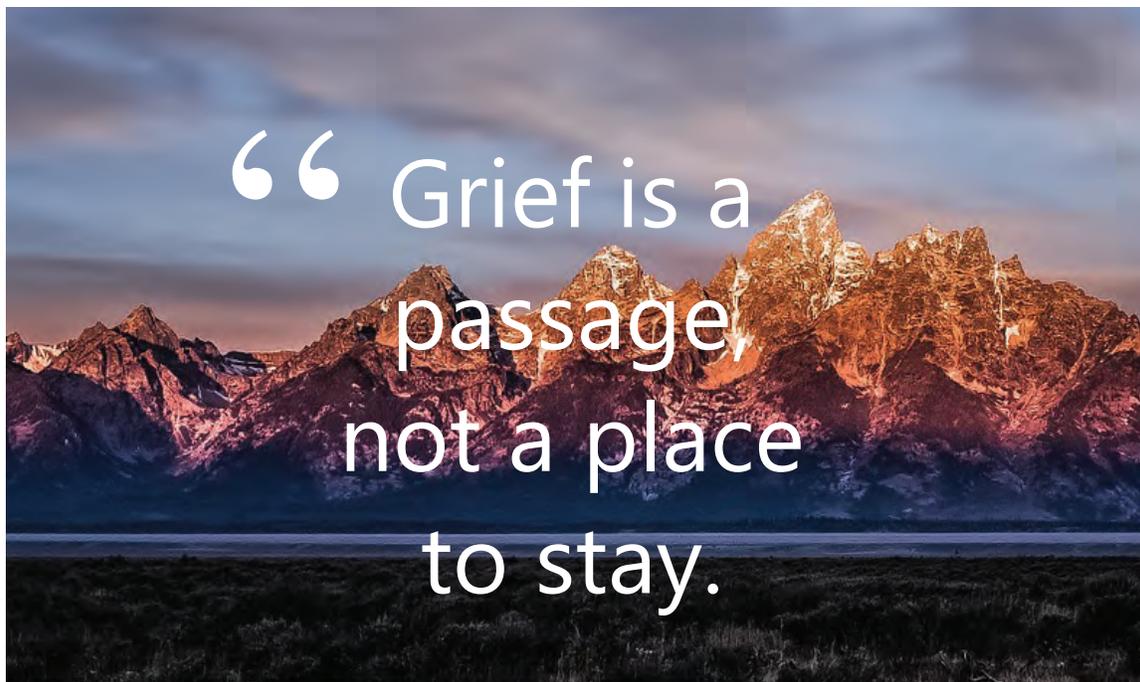
“Grief never ends...
but it changes.”

Grief Is Not Linear

You've probably heard of the five stages of grief, based on the research of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross:

1. Denial – In shock, refusing to talk about it, numb
2. Anger – “Why me?! Life is not fair!”
3. Bargaining – Guilt, “If I do this ...” or “If I only I had done this ...”
4. Depression – Avoiding others, avoiding responsibilities, feeling hopeless
5. Acceptance – Not “It’s okay,” but rather, “It happened and I will be okay”

While some individuals experiencing grief have found comfort in the five-stage model, it's also important to remember that grief is not always linear – there is not a projected course of emotional experience that every “normal” person undergoes and not everyone who grieves experiences denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – and certainly not always in that order.



What We Need After a Trauma

▶ **We need to feel safe**

When we witness any kind of traumatic event in the workplace, our reactions are likely to be intensified and there is a risk for trauma. Witnessing any death whether by natural causes like a heart attack or a workplace accident is traumatic. If the job itself has inherent risk of injury or death (for example, police, fire fighters, other first responders), we need to be prepared to discuss and address this reality.

▶ **We need to be acknowledged and supported – especially for those directly involved**

We will need time to process what happened and to de-stress, along with time to cope and possibly mourn. Initially after a trauma, we may be in shock, and most of us will automatically just say “I’m fine” even when we aren’t. We may not feel comfortable looking “weak” and many of us don’t want to create more work for our co-workers if we “choose” not to work our shift. But if we need additional support, it is critical that we ask for and accept help when it is offered.

▶ **We need a change of scenery**

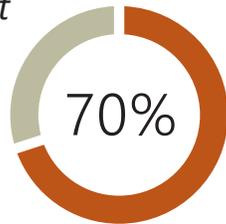
If you are a first responder, you may not be able to leave the scene of trauma right away. But when the job is done and when you are safely able to do so, remove yourself from the scene and take a few moments to compose yourself when you are in a familiar space. For those who are not first responders, keep in mind that it is not unusual to struggle with working in the same space where a traumatic event occurred. If you are struggling, tell your leader or Human Resources.

What We Need After a Trauma

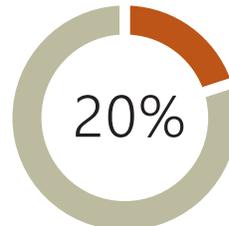
▶ Can you experience trauma just by hearing about it?

Yes. Secondary trauma refers to the emotional stress caused by listening to someone else's traumatic experiences. Those of us who work in human services (counselors, case managers, social workers, other types of care professions) are especially at risk for secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is also a risk for friends and family members of those who have experienced something traumatic. They, too, can be impacted by the trauma and can struggle with the same kinds of issues affecting the person who experienced the trauma directly.

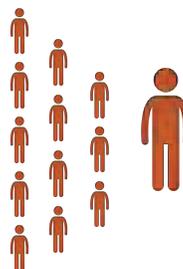
Adults in the United States who have experienced a traumatic event at least once in their lives



Up to 20% of these people go on to develop posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD



Americans have PTSD at any given time.



1 of 13 people in this country will develop PTSD during their lifetime. (SOURCE: Sidran Institute – Trauma Stress Education & Advocacy)

Offering Support After a Loss or Trauma

1. Accept that conversations may be awkward and difficult. There may be awkward silences. You may not be completely articulate. You will probably second-guess a lot of what you say. Sometimes just listening is the most helpful thing you can do.
 2. Avoid compliments. Avoid phrases such as “You’re so strong” or “I would never have the courage you have.” Instead, you might say something like, “I can’t possibly know what you’re going through, but if you ever want to talk, I’m here.” Remember that appearances can be deceiving, and while someone may appear outwardly strong and composed, they may not feel so strong or composed on the inside.
 3. Don’t give advice. While it can be tempting to share guidance, especially if you’ve been through a similar loss or trauma yourself, what might work for you in a difficult situation may not work for someone else, and vice versa.
 4. Listen. Sometimes one of the greatest gifts we can give someone is to just listen, affirm, and know that you don’t have to have the “answers” – sometimes there aren’t any answers.
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5 Simple Ways of Coping

1. Take a walk – even if it’s just to the mailbox. There are numerous health benefits associated with walking, and even if you aren’t up for walking far, just a brief walk and change of scenery can work wonders.
2. Unplug – if social media is more hindrance than help, unplug. You don’t have to delete your accounts, just delete the apps from your phone for a while and avoid “checking in.”
3. Be mindful of what you’re eating – too much? Too little? Strive for moderation and healthy choices.
4. If you drink, drink less – remember alcohol is a depressant.
5. Give yourself at least 15 minutes of private time a day – no kids, no significant other, no devices.

Pouring Down, Not Up

You are at the top of the chain. When you are going through a difficult time, you should be able to “pour down” your stress to the people underneath you on the chain. No one should be “pouring up” to you – if someone in your life is not able to provide the kind of comfort you need following a loss or trauma, consider showing them the next page of this packet.



For the People in Your Life

Whether we are experiencing grief or trauma, or trauma with grief overlapped, we need support from our friends and family members. Sometimes our loved ones just don't know how to support us through these difficult times. Here are some suggestions for them – we recommend you share this page with your friends and family members, as these are some helpful ways in which they can support you:

DON'T SAY	INSTEAD, SAY
You need to talk with someone about this.	Would it be helpful to talk about this?
You're still upset by this?	It takes as long as it takes.
You're strong; these feelings will pass.	You don't have to go it alone; we can get through this together.
Everything happens for a reason.	I don't have an explanation, but I can listen.
I know how you feel.	I don't know how you feel but I'm here to help however I can.
Well, it could be worse.	You've had a rough time. How are you doing?
I figure you'll want to be alone.	If you want to be alone, just say, but I'm here if you want.

For the People in Your Life

- Remind the person that his or her confusing emotions are normal.
- Never assume that men handle this kind of trauma better than women — grief knows no bounds when it comes to gender.
- Remember that we each experience trauma and its consequences differently. Be understanding to the pace at which each person copes and heals, and don't make a schedule by which a person should recover.
- Do not ask for details of the trauma. If the person wants to talk, listen. The best thing to do is to let the person know that you are there and that you care. It is not necessary to try to make things better.
- Spend time with your loved one, but also allow them some private time.
- Touch is very important for recovery. Offer a hug, an arm around the shoulder, or a pat on the hand.
- Help with everyday tasks. Grabbing some groceries, bringing over a meal, or offering to help with children so they can rest are just a few ways you can be there during this time.
- Offer to go on a walk or to exercise together. Encourage healthy choices with nutrition, and encourage your loved one to get a full eight hours of sleep each night.
- Try not to take personally what may seem like anger or other negative feelings.