

How To Navigate Grief in the Workplace

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Let's begin with a brief case study.

Alana was a dedicated employee who recently lost her father. They were incredibly close, and his passing was a major shock.

Alana was crushed.

She took a few days of bereavement leave. She returned to work after, but things weren't the same. Her once vibrant energy had faded, and she struggled to focus. Her productivity dropped, and she felt overwhelmed by her emotions.

Alana's manager, Jane, noticed the change and reached out.

She didn't push Alana to dive back into her usual workload but instead offered her flexibility. "Take the time you need, and let us know how we can support you," Jane said.

The company allowed Alana to adjust her work hours, giving her the space to attend counselling sessions and spend time with her family.

Alana's colleagues also stepped up, offering support and covering for her when she needed it.

Over time, with the support of her workplace, Alana began to heal.

The care and understanding she received not only helped her navigate her grief but also deepened her loyalty to her team and company. She felt valued and knew that her well-being was a priority.

Welcome to our lesson on navigating grief in the workplace.

By the end of this lesson, you'll have a clear understanding of three main things: how to recognise and support grief in the workplace, how to offer empathetic and practical support to grieving colleagues, and how to create a compassionate work environment.

Grief is a complex, deeply personal process that varies significantly from person to person.

It's essential to recognise that grief doesn't follow a set timeline or pattern. According to a study published by Korn Ferry, grief is neither linear nor predictable, and it can manifest in many different forms – from tears and silence to irritability or even overcompensation at work [1].

So, how do we support our employees and colleagues who are experiencing grief?

There are six key ways you can make a difference:

First, offer flexibility. Flexibility is crucial when supporting a grieving employee. The team at Korn Ferry suggests that allowing employees to take extended bereavement leave and offering flexible working hours can make a significant difference [1].

This perspective acknowledges that grief doesn't simply disappear on a specific day.

Second, keep communication open.

Rachel Montañez from Forbes emphasises the importance of maintaining open and empathetic communication with grieving employees. Let them know they can speak openly about their needs without fear of judgment. Even a simple, "I'm here if you need anything," can provide immense comfort [2]. Be sensitive to the fact that some individuals might not know precisely what they need – and that's fine, too.

Third, provide resources. Signposting or providing access to resources like counselling services or support groups is another effective way to support grieving employees.

An article recently published by McKinsey highlights the hidden perils of unresolved grief, noting that it can lead to long-term psychological issues if not addressed properly [3].

By offering these resources, leaders can help employees process their grief in a healthy way.

Fourth, respect privacy [4]. While it's essential to offer support, it's equally important to respect an employee's privacy.

Not everyone is comfortable sharing their personal loss in a work setting. Experts advise against forcing conversations or pressing for details, as this can make the individual feel uncomfortable and pressured [2].

Fifth, acknowledge the loss. Acknowledging the loss is a simple yet powerful gesture. Whether you do it through a sympathy card, flowers, or attending the service, it shows that the company cares. Experts suggest that acknowledging grief publicly within the company can help create a supportive environment where employees feel seen and valued [1].

And sixth, be patient and understanding. Grief is a process that takes time. Patience and understanding are vital [1]. Leaders should be flexible with workloads and deadlines, and should avoid rushing the grieving employee back to their usual productivity levels.

Writing for HBR, Gianpiero Petriglieri and Sally Maitlis explain:

"In the immediate aftermath of the death of a loved one, or at any point in which grief flares up acutely, acknowledging the loss without making demands is the best a manager can do. Let the griever take the lead." [5]

So we've shared what you could do, but it's equally important to know what *not* to do as you try to support an employee or colleague who is grieving.

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Avoid using clichés. Phrases like "They're in a better place" or "Time heals all wounds" can be dismissive and hurtful. Instead, offer genuine support by acknowledging the loss and expressing sympathy.

Don't rush the process. Grief doesn't have a set timeline. According to the team at McKinsey, rushing the process or expecting an employee to "move on" quickly can lead to unresolved grief, which can have long-term negative effects on both the individual and the workplace [3].

And avoid making assumptions.

Grief affects everyone differently. Don't assume that because someone isn't visibly upset, they aren't grieving. Similarly, don't assume that they need or want the same type of support as others.

As we wrap things up, remember that supporting employees through grief requires a combination of empathy, flexibility, and practical support.

By understanding the unpredictable nature of grief and offering a compassionate and supportive work environment, organisations can help employees navigate their grief in a healthy and constructive way.

So, what's the takeaway from all this?

Think about how you can implement these practices in your own workplace.

Start by having open conversations about grief and mental health and by normalising these topics where possible. As Laszlo Bock says in an article for HBR, "There are many taboos at work, and death is one of the greatest." [5]

Take the time to educate your team about the impact of grief and the importance of compassionate support.

By doing so, you'll be contributing to a workplace culture that is not only more empathetic but also more resilient.

Remember, the way we handle grief in the workplace speaks volumes about our values and the kind of environment we strive to create.

[1] 3 ways to support employees navigating grief, Amelia Haynes, Korn Ferry Institute
<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/3-ways-to-support-employees-navigating-grief>

[2] How Companies And Managers Can Support Employees Experiencing Grief, Rachel Montanez, Forbes (2024)
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelmontanez/2024/03/27/how-companies-and-managers-can-support-employees-experiencing-grief/>

[3] The hidden perils of unresolved grief, Charles Dhanaraj and George Kohlrieser, McKinsey (2020)
<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-hidden-perils-of-unresolved-grief>

[4] Your Colleague Is Grieving. How Can You Help, Sonika Bakshi, HBR (2021)
<https://hbr.org/2021/10/your-colleague-is-grieving-how-can-you-help>

[5] When a Colleague Is Grieving, Gianpiero Petriglieri and Sally Maitlis, HBR (2019)
<https://hbr.org/2019/07/when-a-colleague-is-grieving>