

I decided to write this article on a subject that people are still very uncomfortable talking about. Whether it is because they feel awkward, don't know what to say or out of fear. Compared to other cultures we are behind in the way we handle death, dying and the process of grief. We are given 3 days leave from work, a funeral takes place and we are expected to return to our "normal lives" as usual. I was brought up with the stiff british upper lip ideology of no matter how you feel "get up, get dressed and show up"; and not to air our secrets in public.

I have had many losses in my lifetime as many of us have. It was only when the most devastating loss happened; the sudden unexpected death of my Identical Twin Sister. Life changed forever not only in my personal life, also in my professional life and my career. It was during this time that I discovered the dirty little secrets of grief, that no one tells us about.

The following are what I have come to know as being true, walking through this journey:

Grief must be addressed in the workplace and it cannot be the silent elephant in the room. The person experiencing the grief needs to talk about their loved one and their loss. They need to express how they are feeling. It is a roller coaster that changes day to day sometimes... moment to moment. They say there are 5 stages of grief, however I feel there are more. Some of the emotions of grief that we experience are ...

(According to the Kübler Ross Model - Author of On Death And Dying)

Denial

Denial is the stage that can initially help you survive the loss. You might think life makes no sense, has no meaning, and is too overwhelming. You start to deny the news and, in effect, go numb. It's common in this stage to wonder how life will go on in this different state – you are in a state of shock because life as you once knew it, has changed in an instant. If you were diagnosed with a deadly disease, you might believe the news is incorrect – a mistake must have occurred somewhere in the lab—they mixed up your blood work with someone else. If you receive news on the death of a loved one, perhaps you cling to a false hope that they identified the wrong person. In the denial stage, you are not living in 'actual reality,' rather, you are living in a 'preferable' reality. Interestingly, it is denial and shock that help you cope and survive the grief event. Denial aids in pacing your feelings of grief. Instead of becoming completely overwhelmed with grief, we deny it, do not accept it, and stagger its full impact on us at one time. Think of it as your body's natural defense mechanism saying "hey, there's only so much I can handle at once." Once the denial and shock starts to fade, the start of the healing process begins. At this point, those feelings that you were once suppressing are coming to the surface.

Anger

Once you start to live in 'actual' reality again and not in 'preferable' reality, anger might start to set in. This is a common stage to think "why me?" and "life's not fair!" You might look to blame others for the cause of your grief and also may redirect your anger to close friends and family. You find it incomprehensible of how something like this could happen to you. If you are strong in faith, you might start to question your belief in God. "Where is God? Why didn't he protect me?" Researchers and mental health professionals agree that this anger is a necessary stage of grief.

And encourage the anger. It's important to truly feel the anger. It's thought that even though you might seem like you are in an endless cycle of anger, it will dissipate – and the more you truly feel the anger, the more quickly it will dissipate, and the more quickly you will heal. It is not healthy to suppress your feelings of anger – it is a natural response – and perhaps, arguably, a necessary one. In everyday life, we are normally told to control our anger toward situations and toward others. When you experience a grief event, you might feel disconnected from reality – that you have no grounding anymore. Your life has shattered and there's nothing solid to hold onto. Think of anger as a strength to bind you to reality. You might feel deserted or abandoned during a grief event. That no one is there. You are alone in this world. The direction of anger toward something or somebody is what might bridge you back to reality and connect you to people again. It is a “thing.” It's something to grasp onto – a natural step in healing.

Bargaining

When something bad happens, have you ever caught yourself making a deal with God? “Please God, if you heal my husband, I will strive to be the best wife I can ever be – and never complain again.” This is bargaining. In a way, this stage is false hope. You might falsely make yourself believe that you can avoid the grief through a type of negotiation. If you change this, I'll change that. You are so desperate to get your life back to how it was before the grief event, you are willing to make a major life change in an attempt toward normality. Guilt is a common wing man of bargaining. This is when you endure the endless “what if” statements. What if I had left the house 5 minutes sooner – the accident would have never happened. What if I encouraged him to go to the doctor six months ago like I first thought – the cancer could have been found sooner and he could have been saved.

Depression

Depression is a commonly accepted form of grief. In fact, most people associate depression immediately with grief – as it is a “present” emotion. It represents the emptiness we feel when we are living in reality and realize the person or situation is gone or over. In this stage, you might withdraw from life, feel numb, live in a fog, and not want to get out of bed. The world might seem too much and too overwhelming for you to face. You don't want to be around others, don't feel like talking, and experience feelings of hopelessness. You might even experience suicidal thoughts – thinking “what's the point of going on?”

Acceptance

The last stage of grief identified by Kübler-Ross is acceptance. Not in the sense that “it's okay my husband died” rather, “my husband died, but I'm going to be okay.” In this stage, your emotions may begin to stabilize. You re-enter reality. You come to terms with the fact that the “new” reality is that your partner is never coming back – or that you are going to succumb to your illness and die soon – and you're okay with that. It's not a “good” thing – but it's something you can live with. It is definitely a time of adjustment and readjustment. There are good days, there are bad days, and then there are good days again. In this stage, it does not mean you'll never have another bad day – where you are uncontrollably sad. But, the good days tend to outnumber the bad days. In this stage, you may lift from your fog, you start to engage with

friends again, and might even make new relationships as time goes on. You understand your loved one can never be replaced, but you move, grow, and evolve into your new reality.

In addition to the 5 stages listed above I experienced:

- Isolation
- Abandonment
- Insomnia
- Anorexia
- Grief Attacks
- Shock
- Anxiety

The team member that is grieving has a tough road ahead trying to regain productivity, routine and heal at the same time. Grief is incredibly exhausting. It creates brain fog, confusion, instability and mood swings. Some days are okay whereas others are insurmountable.

The workplace needs a compassionate and empathetic HR / Management Team that is educated in loss and grief in order to assist and support the grieving employee. They need to sit down and make a plan which works best for all parties involved. Open, honest conversations need to occur on a regular basis. Sometimes changing an employees duties and responsibilities for a period of time can help immensely and will help take some of the stress and pressure off of the individual (as well as making sure that the workplace is safe and errors are minimized)

An understanding of the grief process indicates that people are in a state of shock and numbness. People confuse numbness with strength, experiencing support at first and then it is withdrawn after the event. We are told to “get over it”, “you should be over this by now”, “he/she is in a better place”, “they did not suffer”... people say all many different of things because they don’t know what to say or do. They are not being mean, they just don’t know. Sometimes silence, a good ear and really listening is the best thing. There is no timeline for grief, everyone grieves in their own way on their own timeline.

HR / Management should have a list of resources for a grieving employee in order for them to receive the help they need (i.e. bereavement counseling, coping skills and talk therapy).

In my bereavement course I discovered -

“Life is a miracle, love is a miracle. Even death and grief are miracles. They are the beginning of the most painful, beautiful, enlightened journey. I sat with other people that have lost loved ones, some ... a long time ago. The vulnerability and authenticity that was shared made me feel “normal” for the first time since life changed forever. I was no longer alone, I no longer felt that I was on other people's timelines, I was damaged beyond repair- that I must get on with it or move forward and let the past go. I was not told that she was in a better place or God gives us only what we can handle or, “ you must move on”. For the first time I felt human, understood, validated and people were speaking from what I call - “The language of the Heart”. There are no shortcuts on this journey, just hard work and the way through. Life goes on as painful as it may

be, however we must go on as well. The light that shines through all of the broken pieces and the miracles that have happened are only but glimpses of what is to come.

In conclusion, my hope is that grief will be addressed in a more empathetic and compassionate; understanding way in the workplace. We work in a very stressful industry and we need to support and help one another, whatever we are going through.

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