

# **At a loss with loss**

## **A glimpse into life crises and the impact of grief in the workplace**

**By Janelle Fletcher**

Loss affects us all whether we like it or not and everybody needs to grieve. But what does all of that look like on the work-front?

People may respond to a similar loss in very different ways and to different extremes, so it is important not to compare people's reactions. Some people may be open and talkative, others may be more withdrawn and reticent. Sadness may not always be expressed through tears, but through other behaviours. Some people may choose to mask their grief especially if they are in front-line positions or in the public eye, but may express it in their "downtime".

There is even such a thing as a "feminine" versus a "masculine" response to grief, which is not based on gender so much as the nature in which we grieve. Burying ourselves in work and having the diary overflowing is typically a more masculine response whereas talking, expressing emotions and trying to find some personal or spiritual meaning in our loss could be seen as a more feminine response.

Factors which may determine the nature and intensity of our grief are age, number of losses in a given time, prior life crises or childhood experiences, present stressors, financial situation, family dynamics, support available and any emergent life opportunities. Whether the loss is anticipated or sudden, personal or more public or has a social stigma attached will also affect the grief process.

It is important to understand the different cultural elements of grief. Much can be gained from observing the Maori traditions and practices around the tangi, expressions of grief and family togetherness. Customs, rituals and timeframes of any culture, and also the depth of faith or spirituality can impact one's experience of grief.

Grief can be a considerably long process and tends to go in stages. Telling someone to "snap out of it" after a few weeks is far from appropriate or helpful. More often than not, grief is ongoing and may take up to a year, or often much longer than that. Waxing and waning like the moon, grief may appear to be "over" and then re-emerge with a certain person, event or anniversary. Prolonged or extreme reactions to grief need to be addressed. Lack of any grief symptoms is also a concern.

### **Strands of the loss rope**

Imagine a rope being the significant loss, event or crisis that has occurred in a person's life. This could include:

- **Death** – natural causes, accident, suicide, stillbirth
- **Illness or disease** perhaps requiring ongoing medical intervention and possibly terminal
- **Miscarriage, abortion and infertility** - often hidden losses
- **Disability or a progressive illness** with increasing loss of physical, mental, cognitive, verbal function
- **Loss associated with the work environment** - restructuring, redundancy, people leaving
- **Transition between career and parenthood**

- **Separation, divorce and family breakdown**

The intertwined or plaited strands that make up the rope can symbolise the more intrinsic losses, which may in fact seem more daunting and all-consuming than the obvious loss. This may include loss around financial security, identity, self-confidence, relationships, role and responsibilities, feeling of being in control, opportunity, peace of mind, dignity and hope.

Grief is considered a normal reaction or adjustment to any significant loss in one's life, but to anyone who is going through it, it often feels more like being in a washing machine on spin cycle or in a blizzard with no way out. The more common grief reactions that may be evident in the workplace are:

- **Physical** – fatigue, exhaustion, headaches
- **Emotional** – sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, fear, overwhelm
- **Behavioural** – tearfulness, under or overreacting, avoidance of certain people, places, tasks or events, strained relationships, using work as a distraction
- **Cognitive** – lack of focus, poor concentration and memory, confusion, indecision, uncertainty
- **Spiritual** – re-evaluating values, beliefs and life priorities

Everyone in the work environment is impacted to some degree. Certain people will be very awkward around grief and be at a loss to know what to say. Others may say something, which comes out completely inappropriately or insensitively. One person's grief may spark their colleagues' own unfinished business around loss and grief. What is important is to have loss openly and honestly acknowledged.

Some people quit work – it is no longer right for them or they may move closer to family and friends. Others change the way they deliver their job – perhaps going from the public into a more private arena or they may change their job completely.

Performance issues may arise but performance was likely to have been an issue prior to the loss itself. Pressure on those in positions of responsibility can mount, productivity may be affected and animosity from colleagues with a larger workload can cause problems on a larger scale.

It is important therefore that extra effort by staff be appreciated and acknowledged and that strategies –either temporary or long-term – be created or implemented to address the larger scale impact of grief on the workplace. Options worth considering are:

- Reduced working hours
- Reshuffle of responsibilities and redistribution of workload
- A less stressful role – temporarily or permanently
- Tasks chunked into "bite-sized" manageable pieces
- Outwork or tasks that can be completed at home
- Temporary relief person
- Flexi-time
- Job sharing
- In-house or external counselling or coaching

Topping the list of things of things that are appreciated by the person who is grieving are gestures of support in the form of notes, phone calls, grocery hampers, prepared meals and visits. People like being kept updated and involved – in the workplace and socially.

Understanding and being listened to without judgement and giving the person time and space for private moments are key. Discretionary and flexible leave allowances also help considerably.

The grieving person can empower themselves by:

- Living moment by moment and progressing at their pace
- Appreciating small pleasures – sunsets, favourite food, beach walks, music
- Expressing their feelings, concerns and specific needs
- Attending to their physical and emotional health
- Having small goals and something to look forward to
- Listening to, trusting and have faith in themselves

Like a piece of rope, grief does have an end and people will often emerge with renewed vigour, focus and clearer priorities and surely it's a win-win situation for people and the workplace if we begin to understand loss and grief better.

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