

WHEN STAFF ARE GRIEVING

HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYERS AND SENIOR MANAGERS

In the workplace issues of loss and grief present special challenges to employers and senior managers. Your task involves a balancing act - supporting an employee or work team, while getting the needs of your workplace met, with all the responsibilities and deadlines that may involve, and the need to maintain a safe work environment. However, while work may need to be done, initially lower productivity may need to occur.

You will know the importance of staff feeling valued and supported, and how this contributes to the success of your workplace and the overall business bottom line. Well supported staff report greater commitment to their work, fellow staff and employer. Staff retention is improved and so is the staff's sense of team spirit.

"There's always someone dealing with loss and grief in the office somewhere. Sometimes we know, sometimes we don't. It's part of life, but it can affect work output and office relationships. We want to make sure we support staff as best we can - and then the business, clients and staff all benefit."
Senior Manager

When staff members face significant change or loss in their lives - whatever may cause it - expect them to experience some level of grief. It could be family break up, an illness, a death, tensions and difficulties in the family of any kind, employment changes, accidents, injury or disability, violence, crime, trauma or a natural disaster. Or it may be more work related - the illness, injury or death of a staff member, or one of their family. From an employer's perspective it may be a loss or change that's no big deal, but for the person facing it, it may be hugely significant and difficult.

Grief is simply the combination of thoughts, feelings and reactions we all experience in response to difficult change and loss. It is a normal human response. It's the way we gradually adjust our lives to the reality of what's happened. And *how* we grieve is also as individual as our fingerprint. Grief is a necessary and important process for people to work through after loss and takes time. Expecting an employee to 'snap out of it' will not mean they suddenly will return to full productivity - nor is this approach conducive to a positive workforce.

Everyone grieves differently. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to experience grief.

There's no secret method to take grief instantly away.

There are no rules. There is no set timetable. There are no set stages you have to pass through in order.

Grief isn't a test. Grief isn't a race or a competition.

It *does* slowly get easier to handle, when people are able to take the time and space they need to come to terms with what's happened in their own way.

Your role?

To create an environment where work can go ahead positively as employees are allowed to move through their necessary grief process.

With professionalism and caring support you can set an example that will have an impact long after the initial events and will be one of the most influential factors in assisting the healing process of grieving staff. You set the culture for others to follow. Of course, you can't expect to please everyone all of the time - or to always get things right for people in distress. However, the general tone you set can

make a very positive difference. And taking care of yourself individually at this time, as well as seeking personal support and guidance in your role, are also all important considerations.

HOW CAN GRIEF AFFECT STAFF?

Reduced Productivity due to

- low energy - tiredness
- poor concentration, easily distracted
- memory loss, forgetfulness
- confusion, disorientation at times
- need to talk about what's happened
- impaired decision making
- fearful, panic attacks
- susceptible to illness
- absenteeism
- more prone to accidents - may need to avoid driving
- strong emotions arising, and not easy to control or predict e.g. sudden tears
- unable to handle more work or overtime hours
- needing to take time off - for leave or for outside work meetings, funerals, tangi

These are all very normal human reactions after loss or trauma. They can be found in work places everywhere.

Note: Some employees may in fact want to work harder and longer hours as a way of coping. You may need to help them not to overdo this.

Strained staff relationships can sometimes occur due to

- grieving staff having less patience, irritability, short temper
- person is withdrawn and uncommunicative
- poor timekeeping - arriving late, leaving early, perceived 'time wasting'
- not finishing work others are depending on - sense of being unreliable
- other staff not understanding grief's impact
- other staff's grief being retriggered by observing another's grief
- embarrassment - not knowing what to say or do
- sense the person grieving may be getting 'special treatment'
- having to redesign a project or reassign roles
- being given extra work without extra payment

These are all normal and understandable reactions within a staff team or workforce. Acknowledging the needs of other staff is very important.

The reaction to grief has no 'quick fix' but, over time, grief allows people to gradually adjust to how things now are and the intensity of their feelings abates. However, a whole range of emotions and thoughts can come and go for quite some time, often experienced like a wave that comes from no where and can be overwhelming. See www.skylight.org.nz - in the *Info for You* articles see or download "What is Grief?" and "Grief is Like...?"

Acknowledge the Loss - Talk About It Honestly

Don't avoid it - however tempting. Don't let it become like an elephant in the room that everyone sees but nobody mentions as they have to squeeze around it all the time.

Acknowledging the loss is often helpful to do before the staff member returns to work, if possible and appropriate. A respectful phone call or pre arranged visit from you can help the person transition back to the workplace, knowing that they have your understanding. If this isn't possible, a letter or card may be considered.

Or it may be that a staff member tells you at work. Listen to them, and give them all the time they need to talk through the situation and any options with you.

Asking the person careful questions can be helpful. Keep asking as they move back into work and keep listening well to your employee's answers. Be aware the grieving people can sometimes be so numb or overwhelmed that they find it hard to even decide or ask for what it is they do need. Make very sure you are clear and direct about what's possible and what's not to avoid any room for misunderstanding. Repeating key information is a good idea, to make sure it's been taken in.

"I knew there were things I needed but I couldn't bring myself to ask for them. I wished someone could have offered me some options or something because I was worrying a lot about leave and about work I was behind on."

Examples:

- Would you like me to tell this information/news to any other staff? If not, reassure them of absolute privacy and confidentiality.
- If so, what would you like them to know, or me to say?
- Do you have some needs at this time I can help you with? Such as questions about leave perhaps? (eg about time off for funeral or tangi, or visits to a lawyers, court or other professional assistance). Would you like to talk about initially arranging reduced work hours? Or help to catch up on work that's worrying you?
- Or, if appropriate, offer to arrange practical support, such as grocery shopping, childcare or meals. Other staff are likely to want to contribute to this. You may be able to help them do this by giving them time from work.

Don't expect the worker to bring up the loss in conversation. Acknowledge it personally to them yourself. Don't think there's a right or wrong way to do this - the wrong thing is more about saying nothing at all to them. Say, perhaps, something like

I am sorry to hear about your loss/situation. I know this must be a difficult time for you (and your family). I would really like to be of help to you if I can, so please do contact me if I can help you.

Is there anything you can think of that may be helpful for you right now? Is there anything you'd like to know about? Or that I can find out about for you? If something does come to mind, just let me know.

Offer specifics e.g. *Can I do xxx for you? Would it be helpful if I ...xxx?*

When At Work

Be prepared to listen to the staff member's needs and to suggest options for them. As the grieving staff member comes to work consider allowing them the freedom to take short 'time out' breaks through the day, to come a little later than usual or go home early for a while or to take prearranged time to attend to personal affairs. Perhaps you could suggest a quiet room they could use if they needed to make personal calls, or cry, or just gather their thoughts.

Make sure all your recordkeeping regarding leave is in order. Have all necessary forms ready, and information on hand. Know about the options yourself. Consider options around making up time taken for appointments etc also, such as later on working extra hours one day or at weekends.

Communicate clearly what's possible and what's not. Keep in touch with them on a regular basis. Gentle accountability is important to the employee and to you.

Be aware of any special days coming up that may be especially difficult, such as birthdays, court appearances, health appointments, holidays or Christmas. Let the person know they are in your thoughts.

Acknowledge the needs of other staff

- Let all other staff know the situation, if you have permission to do so. Otherwise, tell only those you have been asked to.
- Let staff know you realise grief and loss can be hard to manage, especially at work. Consider making general information about grief available. This can be very helpful to many. See www.skylight.org.nz - in the *Info for You - Articles* see "What is Grief?" and "Grief is Like...?" Consider asking someone to speak to the staff about loss and grief. This can break the ice as other staff look to respond to what's happened as best they can.

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“When it happened it actually drew us together as a staff. We talked to each other more and it kind of broke something between us that had built up. Our boss let us meet to talk about it one morning and that really helped. We decided to take up a collection for him. It was good to be doing something. When he came back to work we let him know we would cover for him as long as he needed it. We know it could have happened to any of us.”

- Be aware that the grief of one staff member can trigger grief in others, from either recent or long passed situations. This is not uncommon. Just know it can happen and look to ‘make room’ for people it may affect for a time.
- Arrange to have a counsellor available to the staff member concerned, or to all staff depending on the circumstances. Time together as a staff with a trained counsellor can allow staff to vent their concerns and emotions and to ask questions about the situation and about grief. One on one time allows for private conversations that can be very helpful.
- Let staff know that while you want operations to continue running smoothly, you do realise it’s a time for some flexibility and understanding that things may not run as usual, or may not go as planned.
- Show ongoing appreciation to any staff carrying an extra load for a while
- Take over some tasks yourself if possible.
- Let staff know they too have a role to play in supporting the staff member concerned, and that that’s important. Be open to their suggestions about ways of supporting.
- Consider nominating a staff member as a liaison with the grieving person. This is especially useful if you have a large staff, or if you are absent or at a distance. This can assist the person by dealing with just one person about any work concerns. It may be yourself, or their manager, work friend or a staff counsellor perhaps.
- Encourage staff to attend any relevant out of work events, such as hospital visiting, visiting with the person’s family, or attending a funeral or memorial service. As best you can, proactively make arrangements at work for this to happen.
- Encourage staff to consider a tribute after a workplace bereavement, such as a tree planting or a piece of art, to honour and affirm the value of that person to your staff and business.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Occasionally grief can move into a more serious depression that does not lift. Encourage the employee to seek assistance from a GP, counsellor or other mental health professional - sooner rather than later, when it’s deepened further. See www.depression.org.nz for excellent information about depression and ways through it, and how to support others who are depressed.

