



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Coping with Grief in the Workplace

By Guest Author Danny Creager & Sarah Myers, Clinical Director

While the holiday season is supposed to be a time of joy and celebration, for many it can also be a time of grief, anxiety, depression, or a feeling of being overwhelmed. Many factors can play a role in creating a “less than joyous” time of year, including the ups-and-downs of the previous year. The death of a friend, co-worker or loved one, divorce/separation, loss of a job, financial stress, moving, and physical illness are among the most stressful experiences, and they can all create feelings of grief. If you (or someone you are close to) experiences one or more of these in the last year, you might be overwhelmed by the intensity of the holiday season. This time of year provides the perfect opportunity to discuss the impact our grief, and that of those around us, can have on the workplace. Transitions and changes can be hard, and the effects are often seen or shared on a daily basis in the workplace by our co-workers. It can be particularly difficult when the loss happens within our workplace when a co-worker dies, whether it be from illness, accident, suicide, or even homicide.¹

We spend a significant amount of time with co-workers and colleagues in the workplace. In fact, some of us spend more time at work than we do at home, and our co-workers are very much like an extended family. We forge special bonds of trust and friendship that are unlike our other relationships. We can develop a dependence on them both from a personal and a professional perspective, and oftentimes our mental or emotional health can be affected by those whom we spend so much time around. Stress, for example, is contagious in a workplace setting when deadlines, workload, and dealing with difficult clients can affect how we communicate, our performance, and our health.² Our experiences in the workplace, for better or worse, are shared experiences. Because we share so many experiences with our co-workers, including the ups and downs of life, when there is a death in our workplace, it becomes a poignant loss for us personally, and a profound loss for our firm/organization.

Most of us have experienced the loss of a friend or family member in our personal life. And that loss initiates some level of grief. How we cope with a loss depends on many factors, including our personal beliefs and other stressors in our lives. While many people think that the grieving process is linear and has a “finish line,” the truth is that we might fluctuate back and forth between emotional and cognitive experiences such as anger, confusion, guilt, and

¹ Grieving in the Workplace: Coping with Loss. <https://alis.alberta.ca/ep/eps/tips/tips.html?EK=11611>

² Jeanne Segal, Melinda Smith, Lawrence Robinson, and Robert Segal, *Stress at Work: How to Deal with Job and Workplace Stress*.(June 2016) <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-at-work.htm>.

depression while also feeling acceptance, peace, compassion, and adjustment.³ The myth that there is a linear set of steps that we go through when grieving comes from the research of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. As she studied terminally ill patients in the 1960's, Dr. Kübler-Ross found that we tend to cycle through certain stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) when we are faced with our mortality. While the work was ground breaking, and positively impacted the treatment of terminally ill patients, many in the medical and mental health professions applied the stages to patients who were grieving the death of another person.⁴ In addition, society in general promoted these stages as stringently set guidelines, which had the unfortunate effect of making people feel that if they weren't following the "guidelines," they were grieving incorrectly.⁵ It's important to remember, both for ourselves and those we work with, that the grieving process is unique for every person, and there is not a set of steps we can go through to make the pain of the grieving process "go away."

Similarly, when there is the loss of an employee, the firm/organization as a whole is in a state of grief. Often we find that thoughts of the deceased make it hard to focus on work, or our to-do list in general. Reminiscing about the "good times," the aspects of the person we admired, loved, and miss can certainly distract us. Or we might be angry and depressed. Either way, we may find it difficult to get back on track. Grief can also present in the form of chaos. Who is going to do what? Who will assume those responsibilities? Who will pack up the departed employee's desk or office? In short, the dynamics of the firm/organization change and the significance of that change will depend on the position and responsibilities that the deceased delivered. The structure of the firm/organization has changed and roles within must be modified. Something as simple as "he always made the coffee" can become a stressful issue to address for co-workers, and the accumulation of systemic effects the loss has on the firm/organization can be debilitating.

As individuals, the death of a coworker can trigger thoughts and memories of our own losses and remind us of our own mortality. A strong emotional response to a co-worker's death can have a direct and often negative influence on our physical health and the health of the firm/organization. Long-term feelings of deep sadness can interrupt normal daily activity, robbing us of the energy needed to perform daily responsibilities; therefore, resulting in a negative impact to the firm/organization.

³ Penny A. Hazelton, *Hot Topic: Grief in the Workplace*, 45 Law Libr. Lights 1 (Winter 2001) Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington School of Law,

http://www.law.washington.edu/Directory/docs/Hazelton/article_grieving.pdf

⁴ Ruth Davis Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of Its Five Stages* (August 22, 2016)

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-truth-about-grief-the-myth-of-its-five-stages/>.

⁵ Megan Devine, *The 5 Stages of Grief and Other Lies That Don't Help Anyone* (Dec. 11, 2011)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/megan-devine/stages-of-grief_b_4414077.html

Prolonged grief frequently can lead to depression. Depression has been linked to many other health concerns, such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and stroke.⁶ Trying too hard not to think about a co-worker's death has its own consequences. Those who attempt to lose themselves in their work risk burnout, a state of intense mental and physical exhaustion. Some may turn to unhealthy behaviors to cope with their sadness such as overeating, self-medicating with alcohol, illicit or prescription drugs.

Within the firm/organization, intellectually, employees know the flow of work must continue; however, grief can upset workers and hamper the work environment. Unfortunately, most businesses cannot afford to halt production and forfeit the client or customers' needs to accommodate the grief response. Instead they attempt to continue on in the mode of "business as usual" while discontent and unspoken resentment from repressed emotions can create interoffice conflict, and a reduction in client satisfaction from compromised work product. When a person experiences a loss or an illness, their ability to deal with the grieving process can become even more prolonged. Often this is because there is no outlet for the grief. No one talks, no one discusses the loss. It is important to acknowledge your own grief with coworkers and give them permission to deal with their grief in their own way. Those who feel supported and connected with others are more likely to manage their own grief and allow them to return to business as normal.

Grief is a natural process that requires time. Allow yourself and your employees the opportunity to grieve. You may find these suggestions helpful:

- Allow employees to share their feelings in an open and honest way;
- Create an avenue to express the loss, such as a memorial or firm activity;
- Consider bringing in an outside counselor to provide professional help for individuals and the firm or organization;
- Have a firm policy setting forth the following:
 - Who assumes the person's workload?
 - Who responds to any inquiries regarding the death?
 - How is confidentiality protected regarding files or cases?
 - Who is communicating with the family?
 - Is inventory counsel needed to return client files?
- Contact your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program or other resources you may have such as employee assistance programs for helping everyone with their grief.

⁶ Gardner, "Depressed? It May Boost Your Diabetes Risk" (Nov. 22, 2010), <http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/11/22/depression.diabetes/>

Remember, even if there has not been a recent loss, the holiday season can be a tough time for some. Simply acknowledging that the holidays may be extra stressful may go a long way to helping the work family through it!

About the Authors

<p>Danny Creager, MA, LMFT, LAC, is the Director of Cardinal Points Counseling . Mr. Creager’s private practice is dedicated to helping individuals and families develop healthy, productive, and satisfying lives with relationships and life transitions.</p> <p>Mr. Creager specializes in workplace grief and helps firms/organizations address the grieving process in ways that benefit both the firm/organization and the individual employees.</p> <p>He can be reached at 720-402-1467, dan@cardinalpointscounseling.com or thru his website: http://cardinalpointscounseling.com/</p>	<p>Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC, is the Clinical Director for the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP).</p> <p>COLAP provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for any issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community (including your well-being), or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, visit www.coloradolap.org.</p>
---	---

First published in *The Colorado Lawyer*, December 2016
© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2017

Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.