



Acknowledging Professional Grief and Loss

By Stephanie Mastroantonio, LCSW

Stephanie Mastroantonio is a Clinical Coordinator for the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Therapeutic Foster Care Provider in the state of Colorado. She has specialized experience and training in working with professionals, primary and secondary trauma, community outreach, parenting, and both forensic and medical social work including extensive work supporting attorneys and populations navigating the court system.

Throughout our careers and life stages we are likely to experience significant personal and professional losses. These losses can lead to symptoms of grief including anger, sadness, brain fog, isolation, flu-like symptoms, disturbed sleep and perseverating on the loss.[1] The death of a loved one is often recognized by others in our personal and professional lives as a significant experience that may cause us grief. The death of a colleague, client, or pet may be recognized as a loss by those around us but is not always honored or understood by our professional or social circles as a significantly impactful event. Professional and personal non-death losses, such as losing a case, denial of a motion, illness diagnosis, changing career roles, and the ending of a romantic or personal relationship, may not be easily recognized as grief-inducing life events by ourselves or those we interact with regularly. In addition to varied levels of empathy and understanding based on the type of loss we experience, cultural constructs and societal structures can also impact how we perceive and navigate grief.

Workplaces may not have the necessary information, resources, or practices to support employees who have experienced a significant personal loss via the death of a close loved one. It is common for employers to provide five days of bereavement leave after a significant loss when research suggests grieved individuals are likely to experience symptoms for at least 6 months. [2] Other types of personal and professional losses are often not considered in employer bereavement policies.[3] For those who are self-employed, do contract work, or are part of a small firm, returning to work as soon as possible can be imperative for income generation and business maintenance, regardless of the type of loss one has endured.

Legal professionals often face real and perceived expectations that they must “be on” at all times. “Being on” can be described as feeling as if one’s personal and professional value is defined by always being productive, functioning at 100% capacity regardless of other career and personal circumstances, not feeling or expressing emotions,

[1] Bereavement and grief: Fact sheet for survivors of loss. (2025). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/survivors-of-loss-pep25-01-006.pdf>

[2] Gilbert, S., Mullen, J., Kelloway, E. K., Dimoff, J., Teed, M., & McPhee. (2021). The C.A.R.E. model of employee bereavement model. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 26(5), 405-420. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000287>

[3] Id.

and being mentally strong in the face of adversity and disappointment. This “being on” ideal may negatively influence one’s ability to recognize and process the losses they will inevitably endure as all humans do.

When professional or personal losses of any kind are not acknowledged, each additional loss can compound the other. This can lead to complicated grief which may negatively impact one’s well-being personally and professionally. Complicated grief happens when grief symptoms deepen rather than lighten over time. Research notes intense longing, emotional pain, difficulty accepting the loss, and overwhelming intrusive thoughts about the loss as indications one may be experiencing complicated grief.[4] Professionally, complicated grief may lead to cynicism, detachment from one’s work, and learned helplessness, which is a feeling of powerlessness and the belief that no matter what one does, their efforts will not change any given outcome. This often leads to thoughts such as “it doesn’t matter anyway.” These powerless and defeated cognitions can become so profound that one stops trying altogether. Personally, complicated grief may lead to withdrawal from loved ones and social activities resulting in feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. One may also feel detached from themselves, as if they cannot define or describe who they are anymore. These symptoms may impair our ability to engage in our work and interpersonal relationships and can have negative impacts on our physical and mental health.

While we cannot avoid losses, we can support ourselves through them and attempt to mitigate their complications and impacts. We can do this by recognizing when we experience a loss and understanding the process and symptoms of grief. This recognition and understanding provides us with the opportunity to mourn and allows us to create a plan for symptom management.

Mourning is the active process of grieving a loss. It does not have to be a long or complicated process to help us manage symptoms of grief. This process involves acknowledgement of our feelings, examination of our thoughts, and the identification of helpful coping strategies. We can begin by acknowledging when we have experienced an impactful personal or professional loss. Noticing when a loss feels different, more difficult, causes intense emotional symptoms such as rage or panic, or causes prolonged physical symptoms, such as an increased heart rate, disturbed sleep, clenched jaw or upset stomach, can help us create that awareness.

Next, we tune into our thoughts and self-talk. Are we trying to talk ourselves out of how we feel or minimize our experience with thoughts that may sound like, “it’s not that big of a deal,” or “I’m fine, it could be worse?” If we find our thoughts are minimizing or self-critical, we can give ourselves permission to mourn by interrupting and challenging them. This may look like reframing our thoughts to “it’s okay that I’m upset” or “I’m not okay right now, but I will be.”



The next step is to identify an adaptive coping strategy to manage our feelings of grief and loss. This can be talking to a loved one, colleague, or peer mentor, completing a written or verbal journal entry, listening to a special song, taking a walk, or being in nature. It can also be beneficial to acknowledge the loss through a meaningful ritual or memorial. Utilizing adaptive coping strategies can provide us with time and space to think about the loss; and allows us to recognize and manage the impact it has on us emotionally, personally, and professionally.

Sometimes the amount or type of losses we experience can be too much to manage on our own. Our symptoms may even overlap with clinical depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Grief can become too complicated to manage with adaptive coping strategies and the best of intentions; and that is okay. We are not meant to be infallible. If we find ourselves in that place, that is when we may consider seeking additional support. COLAP can help connect legal professionals with those resources through our free and confidential well-being consultation calls. We may also want to remind ourselves it is okay to feel deeply and to be hurt by the losses we face in

our lives and careers. It is even okay to cry and to allow others to see our tears. It just might give them permission to cry and grieve too.



For more information about grief and loss, stress management, and well-being related strategies, please reach out to the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 for a consultation and/or tailored referrals.



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