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When Death Happens at Work: Working With and Through the Grieving Process

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Death. For many, it is a word that strikes fear, anxiety, and sadness. It is a natural process of life; yet it is complex and often difficult to process when it happens. It is usually not the first thing you think of when you decide to work in the field of human services – so when death occurs, sometimes, we are struck by silence, leaving us speechless, not knowing how to console and support the person who is experiencing grief. We might ask ourselves, “Am I saying the right thing? Is there a “right” thing to say in this moment?” or perhaps, “How do I support this person?”

It is important to remember that death is an inevitable path all living things must experience. Poetically speaking, it is the one promise life offers.

Author Shel Silverstein says, “There are no happy endings. Endings are the saddest part, so just give me a happy middle and a very happy start.” Therefore, as direct support professionals, the only thing we have control over is the quality of time spent together.

When you work within the human services field, there are many mandatory trainings offered to employees to help support, educate, and inform ethical and best practice. For example, many of us are required to take abuse prevention training, safe management, first aid, food handling, back care, etc. The theme of grief is hardly mentioned and, more specifically, how to handle, process, and move forward from grief at work.

When someone dies at the group home or day program you work at, how have you handled it? What were the results of that? Reflecting on these questions should offer you more insight as to your style of how you support grief and, perhaps, lead you to your learning edge. The relationship you have with the person you are supporting also plays a role in how involved you may be in their grieving process. Maybe it is a client you supported as a clinical staff, or supervisor. Maybe it is someone you worked with in the past.

It is our hope that this article can shed some light, and offer some insight and resources to better help you deal with grief, and support others in the workplace.

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We aim to speak more candidly about death and the grieving process. So, let's start off by defining what grief is.

Grief is acute sorrow or deep sadness caused by loss, misfortune, or disaster.

In this article, we will be focusing on grief that results from loss. Grief is very personal and is experienced differently for everyone, and is informed by the cultural context in which one exists. Each culture mourns, celebrates, and has ritualistic practices that deal with death differently. Learning the traditions, customs, and philosophy of the person you are supporting can help with supporting the person in a way that is person-centered.

When someone is grieving, there are many stages that can take place. A common process may include these 3 stages:

Shock and denial. This is the stage where someone may be thinking to themselves, "This cannot be happening to me."

A Sense of Reality. This is the acceptance stage. A person may be thinking to themselves, "This is really true, it happened"

Adjustment. The goal is acceptance and regaining control of one's life.

Things to consider when processing grief:

1. Death happens

Everyone dies, it is inevitable. Our friends, family, neighbours, acquaintances, and coworkers will die. We will die. When you work in a field helping people, the people that we support will die, from age, from illness, complications from surgery, from an accident, from choking, from suicide. They may not die while you are working with them, but sometimes they do.

Sometimes death is predictable and comes more slowly through age or long-term illness. Other deaths are accidental and unexpected. You might need to use CPR or first aid as we are trained, but people still die in these situations, and that can be quite traumatic.

There is never a good time for someone to die. Someday you could come into work and find out that a person you worked with yesterday died in their sleep.

2. Grief happens

Grief is an emotional response to loss and to death. When we care about someone and they die, we grieve. It is a natural reaction and is part of the human experience – everyone grieves.

When it comes to grief, everyone experiences it differently. The first step in grieving is to allow yourself to experience the pain associated with that loss. Give yourself time to feel that pain, to accept the reality of the loss.

When grieving, there are many things we go through mentally and physically. Some emotions you may be feeling are sadness, disbelief, panic, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, relief. Our bodies react to grief as well through physical sensations such as nausea, pain, headaches, dizziness. Some death is more complicated than others, and the grieving process may be quite different.

The process may sometimes feel like an emotional roller coaster, at times steady, even on an incline – and the next thing you know, you're free falling... the type of feeling that tightens your guts as if you could implode within yourself. You might feel stuck for words; the truth is there is no "perfect" thing to say.

Another tough thing about grief is that each death can bring back feelings from the last one. A death at work can remind us of a personal death, and we can mourn past deaths again. Sometimes thinking about someone still brings tears to our eyes.

Anticipatory grief is grief that happens when we know that death is coming soon. Often when you can see it coming, you begin to grieve in advance in anticipation of it happening which can lessen the grief when the loss actually occurs. Though it is never easy, and you can never fully prepare for it. Even if you know it is coming, when it is here, it will still hurt. By having the opportunity to prepare to transition at end of life stages, we learn coping strategies and have opportunities to address issues, so they don't feel unresolved.

Every culture has different ways to grieve, and different rituals surrounding death. There may be a funeral or another type of ceremony. These rituals help people to come together to grieve. If there is a funeral or other ceremony, and you are invited to attend, you may find this to be helpful in your own grieving process. Don't feel pressure to attend if it does not feel right for you; it is ok to make this choice.

3. Be kind to yourself

When grieving, we need to remember to be kind to ourselves. Grief is hard, and it takes its toll on us both mentally and physically. Don't be hard on yourself. Remember grieving takes time, and we all process differently.

Make time for self-care – whatever that looks like for you. Maybe it is exercising, enjoying a meal with friends, a hot bath, watching a funny movie. Make time and space for yourself and be patient with yourself.

4. Talk to each other

When it comes to grief, it is better to let the feelings out, not to internalize them. Talk to your team and share what you are thinking and feeling. Your colleagues will be grieving too, so also make space to allow for them to share with you. You may share some tears, and some laughs, and you may even feel a bit better afterwards.

5. Talk to the individuals you support

We often are on the side of caution and 'don't want to upset anyone,' so we don't talk openly with the individuals that we support about death. If their friend/acquaintance/co-worker has died, talk about it. Allow them to express their feelings and share yours. Remember that you are at work, but you are also human and allowed to share that you are grieving too, that you feel sad too. By sharing our feelings "appropriately," we are also building rapport with the people we support and humanizing the grieving process; it is not just an abstract idea.

6. Talk to your supervisor

Talk to your supervisor or superior about what you feel you need from them. Maybe you just need a minute to compose yourself, maybe you need a day off. Your sorrow is not a weakness. Understanding our limitations and how things affect us is a strength.

7. Celebrate the life

When someone dies, we need to mourn them, but we also need to celebrate their life lived. Have a celebration of life at your program or find some way to celebrate the life of the deceased individual. Sometimes organizations will have a ceremony internally to allow for peers to have a chance to share their memories and feelings. This can be helpful when there is no funeral or if the funeral is not accessible for everyone. Another idea is to put up a picture of the individual who died in a common area of their home or program to serve as a memorial. This can also be a way to open up conversation about the individual who has died and encourages sharing.

8. Find a positive outlet for your grief

Some people find it helpful to have an outlet for their grief beyond physical mourning and talking about it. Grief can be expressed creatively through writing a story or a poem, making music or writing a song, or through making art such as a drawing or painting. You could also do a walk or run in the deceased individual's name, or arrange a tree to be planted, or a plaque put up in a special place.

9. Get the support you need

If you find that your grief is lasting in intensity, and you are feeling overwhelmed by the emotions, please seek professional help. You may be experiencing complicated grief. Complicated grief is when the symptoms don't seem to be lessening, and they remain severe for an extended period and interfere with your day-to-day functioning and quality of life. Many people who experience complicated grief would require professional intervention, such as grief counselling or psychotherapy.

Again, talk to your supervisor or supports at work to look into what is available to you. Grief counselling can be accessed through an employee assistance program, a bereavement network, victim services, or through personal counselling or therapy. There is no shame in getting the support that you need to move forward, and sometimes we need that help.

10. Moving forward

Life goes on. We still need to live and move forward in our lives, adjusting to the loss as part of the present reality. At work, there is a professional responsibility to fulfill our duties in our role. There is still work to be done, other people need your support and need you to be present.

Conclusion

Death happens, and grief is what follows when you care. When you start working in this field it is not something that you think of as 'part of the job' but unfortunately sometimes it is. Grief is hard but we can get through it with time, understanding, and support. Take care of yourselves.

About the authors

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