

Grief and Loss in the Workplace During the Covid-19 Outbreak



The global spread of Covid-19 in early 2020 has created a collective sense of uncertainty, loss and grief that current generations have never experienced before. The impacts will be significant and long-lasting – for our physical and mental health, economy and social culture.

Workplaces in industries across Australia are dealing with the brunt of these impacts. Employees are losing their jobs and incomes while employers and managers are trying to meet costs and keep their doors open.

The sustainability of future workplaces will depend in part on their understanding of grief reactions, acknowledgement of current losses and willingness to implement supports for workplaces and workers.

This resource will provide business owners, managers and employees with information and tools to deal with loss and manage grief both across the workplace and for individuals. This includes:

- Building a basic understanding of grief and loss
- Implementing principles for interacting with others who are experiencing a loss
- Creating a workplace culture where grief and loss is acknowledged and managed respectfully for individuals and effectively for the organisation.

About Grief and Loss

Some basic principles for supporting people who are dealing with loss are:

- Everyone grieves (but not everyone shows it or acknowledges it). It is a natural and normal part of being a human being.
- There isn't a quick fix – the only way through grief is through it.
- There isn't a right or wrong way, or just one way, to grieve. We all deal with loss differently.
- Grief doesn't have a timeframe. How long it takes is different for everyone, depending on things like our values and beliefs, previous experiences, willingness to deal with loss and support networks.
- Grief isn't linear or a step by step process. It comes in waves and it's normal for things we thought we had 'dealt with' to resurface.
- Dealing with loss isn't about trying to 'get over it' or 'move on'. It's about consciously acknowledging what has been lost, grieving for it, being ok with it as a part of our life story and creating a 'new normal'.

Grief Process

It's often explained that people dealing with a loss commonly experience a particular set of reactions, which are:

- Shock (*our body is protecting us from being overloaded with information and emotions*)
- Denial (*this isn't really happening, I'll be ok*)
- Bargaining (*if I follow the Covid-19 guidelines for a couple of weeks, this will all go away*)
- Anger (*This isn't fair, you can't take my job*)
- Sadness (*This is horrible, it could last a long time, I might not find another job*)
- Acceptance (*this is our 'new normal'*)

While people may experience some of these reactions, grieving is not a standard process that everyone does in the same way. It's messy, unpredictable and individual - people will experience some or all of these grief reactions in their own way and their own time.

Support For People Who are Dealing With a Loss

- Listen.
- Spend time together – have online catch ups and phone or and text them.
- Allow time and space for the person to express what's happening for them.
- Don't talk about or compare your own experiences of loss.
- You don't need to give advice – just being there is a great support and silence is ok.
- Give practical help – help fix their fence, bake a dinner or take their kids for the afternoon.
- Support the person to get more information, resources and/or professional support if needed (see below).

What to Not Say

- *"Give yourself 3 months/a year and you'll get over it."*
Grief's timeline is different for everyone and we need to acknowledge rather than try to dismiss our loss.
- *"They'll be ok - just give them some time alone for a while."*
It's important to check in, keep in contact and give people a chance to express themselves as they process a loss.
- *"She only worked a few hours a week – losing that job is no big deal."*
The meaning of a loss is different for every person. For example, losing a job could also mean losing friends, losing access to professional networks or not having a reason to get up every day.
- *"You need to be strong."*
This implies that the grieving person should ignore or hide their fear and sadness. Expressing emotions and asking for help is far more sensible and courageous.

As an Employer or Manager

Follow these guidelines to support your staff as they deal with loss and manage their grief:

- 1. Be patient** as your workers sort through the range of strange, frightening and/or unpleasant emotions they're experiencing.
- 2. Recognise behaviours** that could actually be grief reactions, such as crying, shouting, withdrawing, blaming others, downplaying the situation, wanting to party, being fearful or anxious, or seeming to have no reaction at all.
- 3. Be empathetic** to each person's different ways of grieving and follow these steps:
 - Be aware of why the behaviour may be occurring (grief response)
 - Choose a response that addresses their inner grief, rather than reacting to the (sometimes inappropriate or anti-social) outward behaviour
 - Acknowledge their loss - listen, talk with them, ask what help they want (make suggestions if needed), then support them to get further help if needed
- 4. Be aware of potential signs** that people are not coping, such as:
 - Lacking focus, being forgetful or absent-minded
 - Getting physical ill
 - Not sleeping or eating
 - Losing interest in things they used to enjoy
 - Doing anything excessively (talking, drinking, online gaming, exercising, going out, etc)
 - Isolating themselves
- 5. Support everyone** - even when a person seems to be 'doing ok' it doesn't necessarily mean they are. People (especially some men) can be very good at hiding their emotions, even from themselves. They still need support, just in a different way, such as:
 - Doing a task or activity with one other person, which can give them space to talk
 - Regularly contacting them so they know you're there and support is available
 - Providing access to written, online or phone supports, which they can use in private
- 6. Check in regularly** with each staff member, in the most personal way you can (face to face, video-conferencing, phone, text). This is important, so if you can't reach everyone (or this isn't your skillset), assign someone else to help you do this.
- 7. Listen** - be aware of what is said and not said.
- 8. Encourage people to take preventative action** to boost their mental wellness. Sleep, exercise and eating well are fundamental. Other individual options to keep people feeling good could be things like going fishing, watching a movie, gardening or cooking.
- 9. Encourage people to get further help** if needed. Reduce stigma by assuring people that getting help is sensible, courageous and necessary – just like seeing a doctor for a physical injury. This can include your organisation's Employee Assistance Program or similar services.
- 10. Look after yourself** – you have also experienced a significant loss and need to grieve. Your staff will be looking to you as their role model for how to take care of yourself as you grieve with others around you.

Support for Staff Who are Stood Down

Staff who are stood down from their role are facing multiple losses which impact their financial position, lifestyle and daily routines for their whole family, both now and for some time in the future. This can also impact their perceptions of themselves as breadwinner for their family, a valued employee and a contributing community member.

Employers and managers can help alleviate the impacts of these losses by following the guidelines detailed above. They could also consider:

- 1. Acknowledge the person's loss** - be honest, recognise their situation and be ready to respond to their grief reactions respectfully.
- 2. Provide resources** about dealing with grief and loss to the worker. A detailed list is included below.
- 3. Identify support networks** currently existing in the worker's life and encouraging them to keep in touch with these people. If the worker has limited personal networks, provide them with details about professional support services, online forums, community groups, etc (see below).
- 4. Provide information** about their rights as an employee when they are stood down, where and how to access government assistance and support in finding another job (where relevant), and where they can source more information themselves.
- 5. Keep people informed** - lack of information creates anxiety so keep in contact with workers, even if it's to notify them that nothing has changed. Acknowledge uncertainty about the future and provide updates wherever possible.

Workplace Policies

Managing grief and loss is a work health and safety issue and ethical consideration for every organisation. While it is important to provide additional support during a crisis, these practices should also be integrated into routine workplace protocols, such as:

1. Providing training:

- Upskill managers, supervisors and/or other relevant staff to understand grief, responses to grief and how to manage them
- Mental Health First Aid support person in the workplace
- Peer support program development, where staff members have basic knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to grief in co-workers

2. Providing ongoing support to staff through resources such as:

- Trained Mental health First Aid support person in the workplace
- Managers, supervisors and/or other relevant staff who have practical understanding of loss and grief responses
- Employee Assistance Program (confidential, simple access to a counsellor or psychologist)
- Peer support program

Resources

This list of resources is current and correct at the time of publishing (March 2020). However, please be mindful that information and services may change over time.

Websites, Phone Support and Online Forums

[Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#) has resources and factsheets about a range of losses and how to support others who are grieving.

[My Grief Assist](#) has an extensive range of information and resources, including factsheets, videos, books, songs, meditations and links to other supports.

Lifeline has developed a [Toolkit](#) to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are trying to cope with sorrow loss and grief. Lifeline also has resources about a range of mental health topics, a Coping Kit, factsheets and other links. Call 13 11 14.

[Beyond Blue](#) has resources to help deal with loss (including loss from suicide), and dealing with depression, anxiety or other mental health concerns. Their website also includes online forums where people can link with others experiencing a similar loss. Call 1300 224 636.

[ReachOut.com](#) has resources to support young people dealing with loss and grief.

Other Resources

[Superfriend: Supporting Colleagues Through Loss and Hard Times](#) is a booklet with information about the experience of loss and grief (including job loss) and its affects, common fears people have about supporting someone through loss and practical tips and suggestions about what to do and what not to do.

[HelpGuide.org](#) has information and resources to support people to manage stress relating to losing a job, including grief process, how to take care of your mental and physical health and steps to rebuilding a career.

Apps

[Headspace](#) uses clinically-validate meditation and mindfulness exercises to encourage wellbeing, including when you're coping with grief. You can get help with dealing with stress, handling sadness, grieving and falling asleep. Different packages have different costs.

Local Support

[Deb Rae Solutions](#) (based in Mackay) provides support to individuals and organisations who are dealing with grief and loss. This includes one on one coaching, group training and workshops, resource development, strategic planning for loss that occurs across an organisation and policy writing.

[Suicide Prevention Community Action Planning Group](#) (SPCAP) website includes links to a range of counselling and other services across the Whitsunday, Isaac and Mackay region.

More Information

Please contact Deb Rae on 0448 573 078 or deb@debrae.com.au