

How to support people through grief and loss

by BRONWYN MOTH

Various terms such as “grief” and “bereavement” are used in diverse ways – in this article, we refer to “grief” as the emotions we feel in response to loss. These can include painful emotions commonly spoken about in grief, such as anger, sadness, hopelessness, shock, loneliness, despair and emptiness. However, other emotions can also be present with grief, including joy, pride, a sense of warmth, or thankfulness at having been connected to a valued human being or other. “Bereavement” is a useful term for the process of experiencing grief (the emotions) and the process of making sense of loss over time.

It is common for a significant loss to result in a period of acute distress, characterised by a range of experiences including (but not limited to) painful emotions, poor sleep, a sense of numbness and/or disconnection, changeable emotions, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal from others, irritability, worry and tearfulness. There is [research](#) to suggest that grief lasts between two to six months, while [others](#) suggest that grief can last much longer, for example many years. It is likely that the acute phase of grief is shorter than the bereavement process (where the person is making sense of the loss and coming to terms with the changes that accompany it), but this lengthier process can also feature periods of strong emotion.

It has been thought that most people work through their grief and, over time, the loss decreases in significance, as the person reaches some resolution. However, New Zealand grief counsellor Dr Lois Tonkin proposed [another way](#) of viewing this process, based on what she heard from those she worked with. Rather than expecting grief to shrink over time, she suggested that, for some, the grief and loss remain the same relative size, but the person’s life slowly develops and grows around the loss. This is a helpful idea for those who might feel their grief will never diminish; instead, they might imagine that they will learn to live with their loss by their life “growing” around it.

There are no “right” ways to experience grief and bereavement. Expectations about how these unfold are embedded in cultural, religious, spiritual and social norms. There are also other things that impact on how we cope, including our personality, what we have seen and experienced when those around us experience grief, and the skills we have to help us cope. A few people experience what is sometimes called “complicated” grief, where they struggle to manage and cope with loss to such an extent that it affects their ability to return to their previous level of functioning.

Often people see grief as occurring in relation to the death of someone close, but as psychological [research](#), summarised for business by management academic Professor Mary Ann Hazen, reminds us, grief can accompany other life experiences. The break-up of major relationships, loss of physical health, the effects of natural disasters, the loss of a loved pet and numerous other experiences of loss can result in overwhelming and painful emotions. She points out that what seems like a small loss to one person can seem devastating to others.

HOW CAN WORKPLACES HELP EMPLOYEES MANAGE THE COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF LOSS?

Most organisations offer 1 to 5 days bereavement leave, yet research suggests that recovery from the loss of a close person or animal can take much longer. Intense grief has the potential to impact on a person's judgement, ability to concentrate, safety, productivity and overall wellbeing, so they may need longer leave or task adjustment. For others, being back at work quickly can be part of their sense of "normal" life and recovery being possible, but then strong feelings affect them at a different time. Therefore, it makes sense for organisations and employers to learn how to best support their staff.

In a [recent study](#), researchers interviewed employees from diverse organisations who had experienced the loss of a close person and had returned to full-time employment. They derived the **C.A.R.E.** model of bereavement support (**C**ommunication, **A**ccommodation, **R**ecognition of the loss, and **E**motional support), as follows.

1. **Communication.** Effective and ongoing two-way communication between the employee and the organisation is vital, including:
 - a. The loss itself, decisions about when and whom to share the information with, and how the news might spread throughout the organisation
 - b. The employee's needs. To help understand what the employee is experiencing and what supports or accommodations they might need
 - c. Information related to bereavement policies and available support resources as well as how to access these.
2. **Accommodation** refers to ways of providing support and potentially modifying work beyond the initial bereavement leave.
 - a. The most important thing seemed to be that the leader and employee discussed ideas, using two-way communication to identify what was helpful for them, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
 - b. Modifications could include job re-design, providing a quiet place to go when feeling upset, having the opportunity to have a break from directly working with customers or clients, having the option to take extra breaks, flexible work deadlines, work-from-home arrangements, reduced workload, and additional time off or extra breaks.
 - c. Other forms of support could include flexibility in work schedules, providing tangible help with something a person has difficulty doing, or providing information to help solve problems.

3. **Recognition of the loss.** Recognition can be offered by anyone, from managers, co-workers, and senior administration as well as others connected to the workplace, such as clients, contractors, or community partners. The research found that acknowledgement from senior leaders was sometimes particularly meaningful. Recognition and acknowledgement did not need to be large gestures and participants spoke of it being meaningful when others mentioned the loss, conveyed sympathies, sent cards or flowers, asking whether they should attend the funeral and/or attending the funeral.
4. **Emotional support.** Provision of emotional support can include an offer of empathy, concern, encouragement and/or showing caring. A leader showing genuine and authentic empathy and compassion, co-workers checking in and offering opportunities to talk about the loss and organisation representatives conveying sympathy on behalf of the organisation may also be valued. People can feel shy about mentioning the loss to the bereaved person, or worry that it will upset the person (as if they're not already upset), but a simple "I was sorry to hear about your loss" or a "How are you going?" can be enough.

What did not help included having leaders who ignored the loss or were fearful and seemed unable to acknowledge or validate it, for example, by seeming uncomfortable about sitting down regularly (and following up) to help the employee identify what would be helpful. The research also showed that a lack of caring, being encouraged to "get over" a loss, an absence of work adjustments, intrusive questions, inconsistency in how bereavement leave and support were administered across employees and leaders who made vague, blanket offers of "Let me know if there is anything you need" were also unhelpful.

As we reflect on Matariki this month, let us also reflect on how we can really "C.A.R.E." about those in our workplaces who are managing loss at this time.

