

Illness or death in an employer's family can affect workplace performance. Here's how EA professionals can help.

The Grieving Employee

by Naomi Naierman

When Paul C., a banking executive, told business associates that his 16-year old son had leukemia, he was overwhelmed with supportive responses. After Brandon's tragic 1991 death two months later, Paul's corporate office encouraged him to take a week off to grieve with his family.

"But when I was coming out of the fog six months later," he recalls, "coming off autopilot and hurting, my bosses were aloof and intolerant." By the first anniversary of the death, when Paul's grief was overpowering, the corporate response had shifted from sympathetic to annoyed, and the work atmosphere seemed threatening. "I felt betrayed," Paul remembers.

Since a 1994 study by Managed Health Network, Inc. revealed that illness or death in the family are the second most common problems affecting workplace performance, many responsible employers are asking what they can do. For those employers—and for those who may not understand the scope of the issue — EA professionals can provide a broad understanding of grief's impact. For the grieving employee, EA professionals can offer advocacy and immediate assistance while identifying resources for ongoing support.

In meeting the needs of both employees and managers, EA professionals may find workplace grief a particular challenge. Like this story of the banker on the fast-track who was derailed by grief, tough problems often surface many months after the precipitating event. A supervisor can have difficulty connecting absenteeism, personal conflict, or a decline in productivity with a loss that everyone except the employee has all but forgotten.

Grief's potential costs to the company are significant. No matter where the grieving individual is located on the organizational chart, any business will suffer from the loss of productive work time, mistakes on the job, and the disillusionment of other employees who witness the struggle. Staff turnover means costly recruitment and training.

By honestly acknowledging that loss and grief happen and must be accommodated, EA managers can lay the organizational and emotional groundwork for employees and managers alike.

Compounding the problem are the mixed messages which can be heard in many places of business. "We're all family and we take care of our own here" sounds fine one week, but months later, the same supervisor can become anxious and angry as work is affected. When professionalism and appropriate boundaries seem at odds with support and "doing the right thing," the EA professional has an important role. In both real and human terms, planning a thoughtful response to workplace grief is good business.

A Proactive Approach to Workplace Grief

EAPs can create an environment where the workplace is part of a healing grief process. By honestly acknowledging that loss and grief happen and must be accommodated, EA managers can lay the organizational and emotional groundwork for employees and managers alike. Local hospices and the American Hospice Foundation are available for advice and assistance. Consider the following approaches:

- Always include grief as a workplace issue when making presentations or printing materials. By doing so, you acknowledge that grief is normal and you validate its impact.
- Make certain that your EA staff can recognize grief, which may present in an astonishing number of ways.
- Offer grief training workshops as part of management orientation and continuing education.
- Compile a list of community resources that offer individual or group counseling by experienced grief professionals.
- Have materials available to support employees, inform concerned coworkers, and advise managers.
- Confirm that the company has policies on bereavement leave and staff representation at memorial observances.

Reacting to Workplace Grief

Awareness of grief's on-the-job impact will not mitigate it but can enable you to respond quickly and appropriately. For continuing support, EA professionals may confi-

dently refer grieving employees to hospices with free, community-accessible bereavement programs. The American Hospice Foundation's widely distributed booklet *Grief at Work* offers strategies to successfully navigate grief.

To employees dealing with loss, EAPs can offer the following suggestions:

- Learn that there is no time limit on grieving and that normal grief is unpredictable.
- Take time to get support from others and to be alone. Put off important decisions.
- Learn the policies on bereavement leave and ask for additional leave, if needed.
- Talk to your supervisor if you need a temporary adjustment in work hours, workload, or additional support
- Take control of the small things. Identify the tasks that can be easily accomplished and give yourself credit for completing them.
- Understand that others are as inexperienced at offering help as you are at grieving. Don't hesitate to ask if you know what you need.

Supervisors may find it difficult to balance the need to get the job done with the desire to support their workers. According to the American Hospice Foundation's suggestions for managers, EA professionals can offer the following advice:

- Clarify your role as a supervisor; you can't make grief go away and you can't make the employee "snap out of it." You can provide an environment where the process of healing is encouraged
- Make certain that you have organizational support from administration and personal support from the EAP or another resource. Anticipate dealing with grief reactions for many months.
- Set an example for others in the work-

What is it like to grieve?

- * Grief may be responsible for physical symptoms such as insomnia, appetite changes, malaise, or actual illness
- * Grief affects perception—how we see ourselves and others, how we make decisions
- * Immediate reactions to grief—shock, sadness—are known and expected but we may be unprepared for its long-term manifestations
- * Almost every emotion can be part of a grief reaction: fear, anger, relief, peace, despair, guilt, agitation, and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of grief. There is no order, scale, or time limit for these emotions
- * Individual religious faith may be a source of comfort or a source of struggle in the face of loss.
- * Grief may prompt some to withdraw from life and push others to stay too busy to feel.
- * Grief reactions are as different as the people who experience them; there is no right way to grieve.
- * Grief is not a weakness, it's a necessity. A loss and its meaning can become part of a healthy and happy life.

place. Your caring and your professionalism set the workplace standard.

- Offer specific help. Many grieving people are too tired or too numb to know what they need.
- Expect to hear the story of the employee's loss over and over again. EAPs can be particularly valuable in supporting this difficult supervisory role, or in redirecting the employee's need to have someone listen.

A Valuable EAP Resource

The American Hospice Foundation, a charitable non-profit corporation, is the voice of those who face life-limiting illness and significant loss. The national foundation advocates the hospice concept of care and forges new partnerships with other organizations who serve seriously ill or grieving Americans. The foundation is challenged by an aging population, changing healthcare and loss and violence in schools and in the workplace. Grief affects Americans as never before, requiring skillful support in an era of dwindling resources. The foundation offers training workshops for managers in business, industry and education, employee assistance professionals, and concerned others.

To learn more about the foundation and its workshops or to order booklets, send a self-addressed, stamped #10 envelope to the American Hospice Foundation's president, Naomi Naierman, The American Hospice Foundation, 1130 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036-4101. The foundation has also produced an informative brochure on Alzheimer's Disease and Hospice Care.

- Acknowledge the strain on coworkers who shoulder additional workloads while coping with their own feelings. Let them know that you are concerned for them, too
- Learn the signals of acute grief reactions that may warrant professional intervention—physical changes, deepening isolation, or any emotion that the employee feels is consuming or unmanageable.

The American Hospice Foundation's *Grief at Work* booklet details a number of specific activities that help respond to critical illness in the workplace as well as employee death. EA professionals, with a holistic focus on the personal and family aspects of workers' lives, are uniquely positioned to effect a change in the universal problem of workplace grief. According to a recent poll by the Roper Organization, 84 percent of surveyed workers who had experience with or knowledge of employer-sponsored counseling believed that it improved their outlook and job performance.

As a grieving father, Paul C. wishes he had encountered workplace support on his journey through grief. He recalls that he pushed himself to do what he thought he should, and it occurred to no one to worry about him. As his professional self-image slumped and his family relationships deteriorated, he wondered if he was going to make it. Fortunately, his wife began to tell him of her own support group's discussions. He began to see that although the past could not be changed, something new could be created.

In his role as a bank executive, Paul C. has come to believe that the culture and values of a business are most evident, or absent, when its people are in need. "That's when we show our colors," he says. With a new understanding of what it means to put people first, Paul shares his insights as part of the American Hospice Foundation's *Grief at Work* speaker's bureau.

Helen Fitzgerald, nationally known author and educator on loss and grief, knows the importance of meeting the challenge. "Grief can paralyze and scar us, or grief can teach us and help us to grow," she says. "Counseling professionals have a tremendous opportunity to teach that loss is part of life; we move through grief as part of living, not instead of living."

References are available from the author Naomi Naierman is president and CEO of the American Hospice Foundation.

See page 44 for information on ordering *Grief at Work: A Guide for Employees and Managers*. ❏