



# Heal

**Managing grief in the workplace**  
Aetna Resources For Living<sup>SM</sup>

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**Most of us have  
worked with  
people who  
are grieving.**

**As a manager,  
how can you  
support your  
team and also  
help them stay  
on track?**

**You can use  
this guidebook  
as a resource.**



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# Challenges to basic beliefs

People need time to process distressing news and events. Losses, especially sudden ones, can challenge their beliefs about life.

Here are some ways a trauma can change someone's basic beliefs:

## **Before a traumatic incident**

- Life is predictable
- My world is safe
- I'm in control
- Good things happen to good people

## **After a traumatic incident**

- Unexpected things happen
- I feel afraid and vulnerable
- I've lost control
- Bad things can happen to good people

## **The first 24 hours of grieving**

Reactions vary from person to person. They may also differ across cultures. Common responses to grief include a deep sense of loss and profound emptiness. Some respond in visible ways such as crying. Others may grow quiet and reserved.

New loss can open up feelings of prior losses. It can sometimes be hard to tell the two apart. Often people report changes in appetite, trouble focusing and sleep disturbances within the first few days of a loss. These responses can be uncomfortable for the person and those he or she interacts with. With support from family, coworkers and management, most people's outlook will improve. But it takes time.

Grief doesn't discriminate between managers and hourly employees. Often a work-related loss can be more taxing on a manager. Trying to manage your own emotions can be hard enough without adding your staff's on top of them. It's important for managers to take care of themselves so they can support others. You might even find that helping others helps you.

*With support from family, coworkers and management, most people's outlook will improve. But it takes time.*





# Best practices for management

## Communicate

If communication about a traumatic event isn't timely and clear, your team might feel as if management is hiding something or just doesn't care. Give relevant facts to dispel rumors and help reduce anxiety. You can share any facts that are already public. There might be times when you're not able to disclose certain facts. But whenever possible, keep people informed.

## 10 suggestions for team meetings

Here are some suggestions for issues to cover in team meetings. They can help your team adjust and begin to heal from the present crisis.

1. Let your staff know management believes employees are the company's most valuable asset. Materials can be replaced; people can't.
2. Communicate that management doesn't expect everyone to continue as though nothing has happened. "We know this is a tough time and we don't expect everything to be business as usual."
3. Back up your words by going easy on expectations when it comes to performance metrics and reviews. With enough support, things should return to normal over time.
4. Give team members permission to take care of themselves. "It's okay to take an extra minute or talk about how you feel."
5. Normalize employees' emotions. "You may be feeling some strong emotions (scared, anxious, guilty, sad or angry). You may have a hard time focusing. It might even affect your eating and sleeping. All of this is normal."
6. Set up rumor control.
  - a) Give the facts. This minimizes the effects of rumors and speculation.
  - b) Designate a person to stay in touch with affected families so up-to-date information can be passed on through management.
  - c) Encourage team members to check with management if they hear confusing rumors.
7. Ask what your team members need most at this time. What do they need now to feel safe again? Listen to their suggestions and implement the ones that are appropriate. Let them know they matter.
8. Let them know about "triggers." These are unexpected events, sights or sounds that remind them of the loss.
9. Give your staff permission to go to the funeral if a death occurs. Let them know it's normal if they don't want to go to the funeral. You may need to get help from human resources if you need more coverage to conduct business during the funeral.
10. Tell employees about their benefits with us. Give them the number: Counselors are on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.





# Best practices for management

## Establishing rumor control

Use the following tool to create your communication plan:

- What are the important facts to share? This minimizes the effects of rumors and speculation. \_\_\_\_\_
- Who is the designated person to stay on top of the facts and communications? \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact number (in case of emergency): \_\_\_\_\_
- Who is the designated person to stay in touch with any affected family members so that up-to-date information can be passed on through management? \_\_\_\_\_
- Where will additional public access information (hospital location, funeral arrangements, updates) be located? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the contingency plan if employees or management hear rumors? \_\_\_\_\_

**Suggested action:** Encourage team members to check with management if they hear any news or confusing rumors.

## How to spot a troubled employee

How can you tell if a team member is having trouble? Chances are he or she will show repeated poor performance. This may even include unacceptable behavior on the job.

The below list of warning signals won't identify the nature of an employee's problem. But it can help you notice if a team member may be struggling.

<b>Missing work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unauthorized leave</li> <li>• Sick leave</li> <li>• Frequent absences</li> <li>• Repeated absences that follow a pattern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Late returning from break</li> <li>• Leaving early</li> <li>• Unlikely excuses for absences</li> <li>• Unscheduled absences (no medical explanation)</li> </ul>
<b>"Presenteeism"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distraction while at work</li> <li>• Frequent trips to the water fountain or rest rooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long coffee breaks</li> <li>• Physical illness on the job</li> <li>• Talking excessively about personal matters</li> </ul>
<b>Reporting to work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coming to work in an impaired state</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Returning to work in an impaired state</li> </ul>
<b>Confusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trouble recalling instructions, details, etc.</li> <li>• Increasing trouble with complex tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trouble recalling mistakes</li> </ul>
<b>Trouble with concentration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work requires greater effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jobs take more time</li> </ul>
<b>Uneven work patterns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternating periods of high and low productivity</li> <li>• Alternating periods of high and low morale</li> <li>• Missed deadlines</li> <li>• Excuses for poor performance</li> <li>• Missed details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wasted materials</li> <li>• Poor decisions</li> <li>• Complaints from customers</li> <li>• Complaints from co-workers</li> </ul>
<b>Poor team relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over-reacting to real or imagined criticism</li> <li>• Wide swings in morale</li> <li>• Borrowing money from co-workers</li> <li>• Unreasonable resentments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistent negative attitudes about work</li> <li>• Persistent negative attitudes about other employees</li> </ul>
<b>High accident rate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accidents on or off the job</li> </ul>	





# Checking in with your staff

Team members appreciate managers who check in to see how they're doing. Many times with a sudden death or traumatic event, people's beliefs about how things are supposed to be are shaken. A positive management presence can convey a sense of security and normalcy. Listening to your team allows the healthy expression of emotion. Don't worry that you might not have all the answers. It's most important that your team members feel heard.

- Walk around the workplace
- Stop and talk with team members
- Ask how they're doing
- Ask if they need more information
- Be as honest as possible when answering questions
- Listen
- Don't try to solve the problem
- Find a time and place to talk about your own grief issues so you can support your team

Be sure to let your team know about their benefits with us. They can place a call from work or home anytime, 24/7 — wherever they feel comfortable talking.

**IMPORTANT:** Support appropriate employee projects to honor the deceased and help surviving family members. For example:

- Signing cards or a memory book to give the family
- Raising money for the family or their favorite charity by having a barbecue
- Planting a tree and posting a memorial plaque

Memorials allow for the healthy expression of emotion. The best ideas for memorials often come from team members.

## Making a referral

You might have a team member who needs more support. As a manager you can bring a distressed team member into your office to call us together. Simply explain the situation to the counselor and give your team member time alone to speak with the counselor.

## Trauma

Traumatic loss is the sudden, unexpected death of a family member, coworker or friend. Survivors may experience symptoms of grief and trauma. Effects of trauma may include feelings of fear, anxiety, numbness and a sense of disconnection from others. People may also experience spiritual crisis as well as feelings of betrayal or difficulty making sense of their loss.





# More information on grief

The remainder of this information is intended to give you a better background on the grief process. It includes:

- Ideas you can use to help people going through acute grief
- A pamphlet that can be printed and shared with your team
- A guide for identifying a troubled employee

It's divided into three sections:

- 1. The grieving process.** General grief information.
- 2. Ways to heal.** Activities team members in acute grief can use.
- 3. Helping yourself with grief.** A pamphlet that can be printed and shared.

## The grieving process

Grief is a natural and necessary reaction to a significant change or loss. Depending on the nature of the loss, it may pass quickly or last for a period of time. Whatever our experience, understanding grief can help us face the reality of a loss, deal with difficult feelings and thoughts, adjust to a new life, recover and even grow.

One of the things that can seem overwhelming about grief is that it can affect every aspect of our lives. Grief

reactions can be emotional, psychological, social, physical and/or spiritual in nature. It may seem as if no aspect of our lives remains untouched by grief. The reactions can come in tidal waves, leaving us feeling out of control. Or they can hit us slowly or after we think we're "over" a loss.

No two people will experience grief in exactly the same way. The intensity and extent of our grief will depend on our relationship with what we've lost. When grieving the death of a loved one, our grief will be as unique as our relationship. It will be influenced by the situation surrounding the loss, the social support we have, our cultural heritage and our beliefs.

There are, however, certain experiences that most grieving people share. This is what we call the "grief process." It's a process because it unfolds over time. Our thoughts and feelings may vary from day to day or even from hour to hour.

## Shock and denial

Our first reaction is often, "It can't be. There must be some mistake." Disbelief and a sense of numbness provide a buffer against feeling a loss all at once. It may be hard to think clearly or make decisions. Tears may flow and we may experience nausea, headaches, insomnia or lack of appetite. This may last from a few hours to a few weeks.







# More information on grief

## Despair

Denial gives way to emotions as we begin to move toward accepting the loss. Some of the most common reactions include:

**Anger.** We may feel resentful of others or angry with ourselves for not preventing the loss. Our anger may be directed at those around us, the person who passed away or even at the world.

**Guilt.** Thinking of things we wish we had done differently may lead to guilt.

**Fear and anxiety.** Loss means that whatever happens next, life won't be the same as before. It's normal to worry about the unknown. It takes time to create a new direction in life.

**Sadness and loneliness.** Feeling exhausted and struggling through the return to a routine is normal for a while. We may feel a sense of emptiness and lack of interest in things we once enjoyed. It may be hard to concentrate. It might be difficult to think about the future. We might over- or under-eat or sleep.

**Searching.** A lot of mental energy may be consumed trying to understand why a loss has happened. Why? Why now? We have a deep need to understand loss in the larger context of life and our belief system. This is all part of the process of finding eventual peace.

Many other emotions may emerge. We may have trouble feeling motivated or completing tasks. Or we might feel restless. We may feel as if the rug has been pulled out from under us; like we don't know where we fit anymore. We may even question who we are now.

This period of despair may last from a few weeks to many months as we work to experience the pain of the loss and come to terms with its meaning for our life.

## Release

During this time, the pain of the loss begins to lessen and the good days outnumber the difficult ones. The period of release is about letting go, regaining emotional energy, finding forgiveness, saying goodbye — all those things that bring closure to a relationship. We start to be able to imagine a future for ourselves without the presence of what we have lost.

This isn't easy for most of us and may come and go over time as we work to adjust to the changes in our lives. There may be times when we begin to enjoy things again but feel guilty about it. This is a common experience. In time, we begin to see that we can heal without forgetting.

## Renewal

The last part of the grief process is what we might call renewal or "finding a new normal." You may have heard people talk about "putting their lives back together." Finding a new normal means being able to identify the "new me."

It's about accepting we will never be exactly the same, but that we are okay and may even be stronger in some ways. We realize that we can feel good about feeling good again and can look forward to what life has to offer. The task of renewal is to accept that the loss will always be a part of who we are and find its rightful place as we move forward with our lives.





# Ways to heal

Healing takes time. It helps to have practical tactics to use in your daily life, strategies to address emotional needs and ways of getting support. Here are some suggestions:

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- In the first few days after a loss, alternate periods of exercise with rest and relaxation.
- Structure your time. Keep busy.
- Wait until you feel better to make any major life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible. That can give you a feeling of control over your life.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Avoid trying to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol.
- Keep a journal. Writing down your feelings can be therapeutic.
- Reach out and talk to people. Spending time with others and sharing your experiences can help.
- Give yourself permission to feel sad and share your feelings with others. Talk to co-workers for support and to find out how they're doing.

- If you have recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks, they are normal. Don't try to fight them. They'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Accept your reactions. But don't be afraid to reach out for professional help if disturbing feelings persist.

## For family members and friends:

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the affected person.
- Offer help and a listening ear even if they haven't asked.
- Reassure your loved one he or she is safe.
- Help your loved one with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking and caring for the family.
- Give your loved one some private time.
- Don't take your loved one's anger or other feelings personally.
- It's not helpful to minimize the event or say "it could have been worse." Instead, tell the person you're sorry such an event has happened and you want to understand and help.







# Helping yourself with grief

## What is grief?

Grief is a unique expression of your pain and struggle as you cope with a loss. You can experience grief in a variety of ways. It can be influenced by factors such as:

- The relationship you had with the person who passed away
- The situation surrounding the death
- The social support you have
- Your cultural heritage and beliefs

Your grief is unique to you. No one else can know exactly how you feel. Although there are stages of the grief process, you can't really be sure how long your grief might last. Grief is normal and it moves at its own pace. When someone you love has passed away, you can be faced with a lot of emotions and the need to mourn. Mourning is the normal expression of overwhelming emotion and thoughts about your loss. Expressing these emotions will allow you to move toward healing.

## Emotional overload

Facing a loss affects your thoughts and feelings. The number of emotions can be confusing. Some of the emotions you might feel include guilt, relief, anger and frustration. Sometimes these emotions come quickly and last for short periods of time. Other times, several emotions follow one right after the other and last for longer periods of time.

Believe it or not, these emotions are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these experiences and emotions. Often, people will unexpectedly experience emotions that appear to come from out of the blue. Don't panic and don't be surprised. Find a friend or someone to talk to about your feelings.

## Knowing your limits

It's a lot of work for you to grieve and mourn. You might feel fatigued. And your reasoning and thinking abilities can be impaired. Respect your body's way of telling you to slow down and rest. Nurture yourself. Get plenty of sleep. When you experience too many stressors, you can reach emotional overload. At that point, you may want to seek help from a mental health professional.

## Talking about your grief

In order to move through the process of grieving, it's important to express your grief openly. This can be done by talking with someone you trust. Find a counselor, friend, support group or pastor who's willing to listen. This can help you feel a little better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart and express all your feelings.

Remember, emotions are natural and talking about them doesn't mean you're "crazy." Be sure to talk to people who will listen and not judge. These are people who will "walk beside" you in your journey.

If you find that someone is critical of your thoughts, emotions or things you say, you can simply avoid them. They will only prolong your journey. These people might say things like "Keep your chin up" or "Just be happy" and other clichés that may hurt your feelings. These people aren't trying to hurt you. They might even think they're helping. They just don't understand the depth of what you're experiencing.

*Give yourself permission  
to feel sad and  
share your feelings  
with others.*



# Helping yourself with grief

## Reaching out to others

Developing a support system and reaching out to others might not be easy for you. You can start by reaching out to caring friends and relatives. Be genuine and be yourself. Express what you're feeling to them.

## What is a ritual?

A ritual is a way to publicly acknowledge the death of your loved one. Funeral services can provide this while also offering support from caring family and friends. They're meant to offer a safe space for you to express your grief. They also allow others to pay tribute in their own way.

## Using spirituality

If you consider yourself a spiritual person, you can express that in a way that feels appropriate for you. Being with

people of like mind can give you the opportunity to share your beliefs. It's not uncommon for you to question your beliefs during a time of grief. It might help to find someone who won't be critical of the thoughts, fears and feelings you need to express. Over time, it can help your healing process if you can reconcile your loss with your beliefs.

## Finding meaning

You may have questions concerning your loss. These are also part of the normal process of grieving. You might be able to answer some of the questions, while others might have no answer. Remember that healing comes from the questions, not necessarily from the answers. Search for this meaning with a compassionate friend.

Be sure to let your team know about their benefits with us. They can place a call from work or home anytime, 24/7 — wherever they feel comfortable talking.



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