

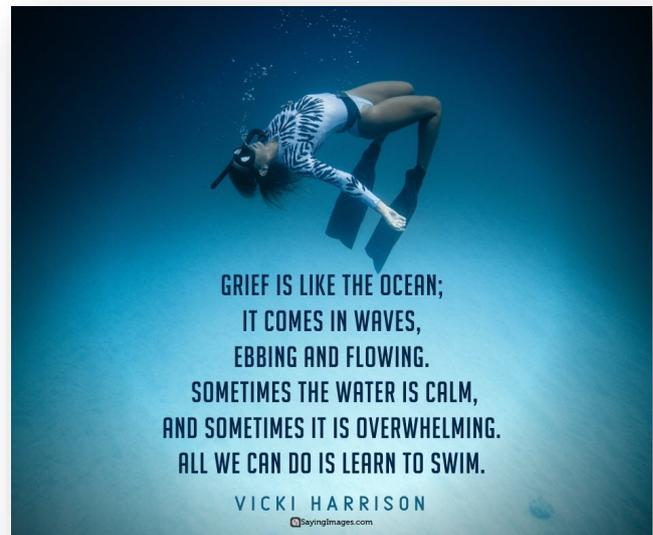
LOSS AND GRIEF – NAVIGATING THE INEVITABLE.

[Chances](#) are, there is a hidden attendee in your team's online meetings right now, holding back one or more of your colleagues, fostering self-doubt, causing them to dwell on failure, barriers, and everything that can go wrong. It is sapping their energy, health, and leadership capacity. It might even be happening to you!!

This force that lurks in the shadows is unresolved grief. [Research](#) suggests it costs US companies \$75 billion a year in lost productivity and performance (this is pre-COVID 19). McKinsey's multiyear research found that unresolved grief is a pervasive, overlooked leadership derailer that affects perhaps 33% of senior executives at one time or another. Not to mention that stress from grief [damages our physical health](#). Yet the loss of leadership capability and potential that results from unresolved grief, as well as the human suffering and pain, may be immeasurable.

However, it is not just unresolved grief, but also the current multitude of losses, some requiring tombstones and others not, that demands our attention. These losses include amongst others: daily rhythms and rituals (coffee shop rendezvous), milestones (matric dances, school plays and graduation ceremonies), favourite past times (team sports, socialising with friends on the weekends), to economic insecurity and loss of identity (working from home). With no avenues to express our feelings, these feelings are suppressed whilst simultaneously building up within us, manifesting in alienation, a pervasive grey mundaneness, and fatigue.

In the last year COVID-19 has transitioned from being an abstract statistic to names and faces we know intimately. Whilst death is a natural part of the cycle of life, its cadence and prevalence seem to have become omnipresent, infiltrating our thoughts, discussions, and actions. Add both the uncertainty and anxiety of what the future holds, and a toxic cocktail of fear has left us with a nasty hangover.



Griefs Alphabet (Anticipatory, Bereavement, Complicated & Disenfranchised)

Grief is a truly multi-textured emotion that needs to be explained in its various shapes for us to understand, support and/or live with it.

Grief is the personal experience of loss. It is the [anguish](#) from significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. Grief may also take the form of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself. Grief can arise from the loss of one or more deep-seated human needs:

Loss of attachment—who am I connected to?	I need to feel connected, bonded, secure, or included.
Loss of territory—where do I belong?	I need to feel a sense of belonging or grounding to a place or a home.
Loss of structure—what is my role?	I need to feel important, involved, and valued.
Loss of identity—who am I?	I need to know who I am as an individual, what I stand for, what my values are.
Loss of future—where am I going?	I need to know my direction and have hope and positive expectations.
Loss of meaning—what is the point?	I need to find meaning and purpose in all situations.
Loss of control—I feel overwhelmed	I need to feel in control of the situation or my destiny.

McKinsey

Grief can be distinguished from [bereavement](#) and [mourning](#). *Bereavement* is the condition of having lost a loved one to death. Not all bereavements result in a strong grief response, and not all grief is given public expression. *Mourning* is the process through which, with the help of others, we learn to face loss, muddle through it, and slowly returned to life.

Anticipatory grief, in simpler times, is how we tried to prepare ourselves for an impending death, a piecemeal approach to coping with the losses we face in the moment, ahead of the larger grief that loomed e.g., terminal illness of a loved one. During this pandemic, we do not readily know how to grieve our losses piecemeal. Changes are occurring daily, making it difficult to anticipate what we may lose next. We are in a collective holding pattern, wondering: "How long until I get to see my grandkids, friends and family again?" or "Will the store/beaches/cinemas/restaurants still be open tomorrow?" and even "Is tomorrow the day I lose my job?" It is important to give ourselves permission to ask these questions and voice our fears, whilst also working to accept that some answers are currently out of our control.

Disenfranchised grief occurs in response to any form of death/loss we cannot publicly mourn, either based on our relationship to the deceased, the cause of death or other cultural/societal factors that make our grief taboo or difficult for others to face or understand. Certainly, with COVID-19, many are experiencing disenfranchised grief as we struggle to identify our current experiences as events, we feel we are not "allowed" to mourn. Indeed, it feels strange to turn to a friend and say, "I'm grieving the loss of my routine," or "I'm mourning going to the gym," because these things can feel trite in the grand scheme of a global pandemic. In fact, they are not trite at all, they are genuine parts of our individual and collective human experience and they are a genuine cause for grief. Pain is not comparable; we are allowed to grieve our own losses. Just as we recognize and allow others their pain with heartfelt compassion, it is important we give that same degree of care, empathy, and understanding to ourselves.

Grief is a universal human experience (and with its current relevance propelled it to the most read [Harvard Business Review article of 2020!!](#)). It is sadly ironic then that the workplace culture can be inhospitable for people suffering profound loss. When our organisations are not humane, they deprive people of desperately needed support, erode collegial bonds, and drain working lives of meaning. The result can be disenfranchised grief. Stigma associated with suffering, [studies find](#), is the prime culprit, and is most salient for people in leadership roles, prestigious organizations, and competitive workplaces, that is, in roles and environments where employees are supposed to "keep it together." I remember asking a bunch of medical doctors that were specialising how were they taught to deal with the inevitable loss of a patient, and they responded that had a 30 min lecture early on in their studies, that was it!! And we wonder why our doctors and nurses are struggling!!

So, what happens now that we are besieged by grief while we work and live at a distance for many months? Will grief remain frozen because people do not have enough support, access to their rituals, to grieve? Normal and healthy grieving may turn into complicated grief, which results in acute pain, apathy, and disorientation long after a loss. Those experiences are often misunderstood as symptoms of burnout, partly because of the productivity sprint the pandemic has created. Will a year of many losses and social isolation, manifest in a collective bout of complicated grief?

Grief can affect the mind and body in dramatic ways. At first it may permeate everything. You may find it hard to sleep and eat. It may be difficult to muster enthusiasm for life around you. You may experience restlessness, memory impairment, or difficulty concentrating. The emotional maelstrom that grief stirs up can affect behavior and judgment. It's common, to feel agitated, exhausted or to cry and withdraw from the world at times. Sometimes intrusive or upsetting memories surface, as can temporary sensations of things being unreal. People who are grieving regularly have the experience of sensing the presence or hearing the voice of the

deceased. These experiences are not pathological. The effects are not just emotional. People may be more susceptible to physical illness as immune cell function falls and inflammatory responses rise in people suffering bereavement.

[Research](#) shows that up to 40% of widows/widowers have symptoms typical of major depression during the first few months after a spouse's death. This drops to 15% at the 1-year mark. If months or even years go by with no improvement, however slow or painful, they may be suffering from complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder which affects roughly 10% of bereaved people. *Complicated Grief (CG)* emphasizes the disruption of a normal grief journey, whilst *Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD)* is characterized by a chronic state of intense grieving that disturbs functioning over months or years. CG is often used to highlight some grief response that differs from normal grief, PGD denotes a particular form that CG can take. By definition complicated grief also includes at least four of the following symptoms: difficulty moving on, numbness or detachment, bitterness, feelings that life is empty without the deceased, trouble accepting the death, a sense that the future holds no meaning without the deceased, being on edge or agitated, difficulty trusting others since the loss could mean more emotional turmoil, social withdrawal-including from social media, difficulty reengaging with life.

The [major features](#) of PGD (which need to have continued for at least 6 consecutive months) are: marked and persistent separation distress reflected in intense feelings of loneliness, yearnings for, or preoccupation with the deceased; and significant impairment in social, occupational or family functioning (e.g. domestic responsibilities). In addition, at least 5 of the following 9 symptoms must have been experienced almost daily to a debilitating degree: 1) diminished sense of self (e.g. self as empty or confused, or as part of oneself has died); 2) difficulty accepting the loss as real, both emotionally and intellectually; 3) avoidance of reminders of the loss; 4) inability to trust others or to feel they understand; 5) extreme bitterness or anger over the death; 6) extreme difficulty moving on with life (making new friends, pursuing new interests); 7) pervasive numbness (absence of emotion, ability to feel); or detachment (social withdrawal); 8) belief that life is empty and seeing the future as without purpose; 9) feeling stunned, dazed or shocked by the death.

The vast majority of people experiencing loss are able to move forward with their lives. That's not to say that it's easy. It is natural to experience sadness, irritability, and anger. It is imperative to consult their mental healthcare professional if they experience any of these symptoms of bereavement related depression: suicidal thoughts; persistent feelings of worthlessness which are common with depression but not with healthy grief, hopelessness and helplessness, ongoing guilt, marked mental and physical sluggishness, persistent trouble functioning, hallucinations other than thinking they hear or see the deceased.

Griefs slippery nature

“[Grief](#) is a shape-shifty bastard: at times a fog, at times a coma; a pain so searing it literally sucks the breath out of me; a gentle, sweet breeze of memory; a warm hand pressing deep into my chest; a fiery burning rage down my spine, singeing my lungs; a darkness beside/within me; a wistful teary thought; my Great Ache, always.”

Short answer: grief is different for different people based on personality, culture, and context of their loss(es). Research shows that [certain factors](#) can make grieving harder, they are when the person had:

- highly dependent relationship with the deceased;
- have experienced multiple deaths or important losses;
- have suffered from depression or other mental illnesses;
- have low self-esteem.

Circumstances surrounding the death may also make a difference, they include:

- the death was unexpected;
- the death was traumatic/violent;
- the death was from suicide or a stigmatised illness;
- you bear some responsibility for the death;
- you helped care for the deceased for more than six months;
- you were unable to perform cultural rituals of importance;
- you have little social support or opportunities to meet others in new pursuits;
- under stress from other crises.

Losses are like termites: they rarely exist alone e.g., during a divorce, you might not just lose your partner, but your social network and family home. They can also resurrect previous losses one has experienced. Depending on the strength of the bond that was broken, grief can be lifelong....The legacy of grief is individual and multifaceted. In the midst of loss, some people find opportunities for growth. They emerge from the depths of their grief with greater confidence in their ability to manage life sorrows and difficulties. People often redefine themselves in terms of their position in the family or their role in the world. For others, like a close friend of mine who was the life and soul of the party, whom committed suicide when we had just turned 21, his parents were forever saddened, a raw open wound that did not heal.

Cultural differences to grief

[Certain aspects](#) of grief are practically universal. Most [cultures](#) have rituals of mourning after a death. Crying is common, regardless of a person's origins. However, the

bereavement process can vary dramatically depending on one's culture (and even from family to family). Some broad examples include:

African black culture: in Zulu culture, it usually requires that a funeral be held within a week of the persons death. There is a resting place in the household (e.g., their bedroom), which is treated as a sacred space. Prayers/vigil are held, and people pay their respects in this sacred space. Zulu people gather and support each other during death. They cannot watch TV/radio for a period of time after the death, as a sign of pausing and respecting the departed. Some donations are made by guests towards funeral costs. The night before the funeral is a vigil through the whole night, which includes singing and prayers. Men go to the cemetery and dig the grave. The funeral is typically a church ceremony and then the person is buried. As grievors arrive back at the house, there is a washing hands ceremony, then lunch is served. There is expectation for younger Zulu people to shave their heads in mourning. There may be a change in attire based on the relationship and the status of the person who died ito how long they grieve for. There is also a cleansing of the house and a slaughter of an animal (couple of months after funeral, and an unveiling of the tombstone). This shows the transition from being deceased to ancestor status.

Muslim culture: The burial of the deceased takes place as soon as possible after the death, naturally this is situation dependent (e.g. delayed autopsy), but Muslims believe the sooner burial takes place the better for the departed soul. Family often rallies around to help organise what needs to happen. The ritual of close family members (same sex as deceased and spouse) carefully bathing the body and wrapping it in a linen shroud is often a significant experience. Grief at this time is expressed by family and friends through prayers, quiet weeping and reading from the Holy Quran. An informal prayer ceremony is held at the home of the deceased, after which the formal prayer ceremony takes place at a Mosque. Thereafter the deceased is laid to rest with additional prayers offered in the graveyard.

Under Islamic funeral customs, the mourning period for a relative is typically 3 days. A widows mourning period is however 4 months and 10 days. A prayer gathering is held on the 3rd, 7th, 40th and 100th nights from the day the person died. Where this is not possible a virtual prayer gathering might be held. At these gatherings, family and friends share encouragement, comfort and prayers that further assist the grieving process. These rituals create the environment to start the closure process and can be profound. A Muslim friend of mine who lost her husband recently had this to say: "I recall Sara took a flower from our garden and put it on him and a little ant came with it. As I tried to brush it away, I thought..well, this is the start of his decomposition. So strange, the little realisations that form part of accepting his death."

White cultures: there tends to be huge variation based on the spiritual beliefs or the lack thereof of the deceased. Sometimes there is a church service where people wear black clothes. Thereafter is a burial or cremation and a spreading of the ashes at a favourite place, followed by a wake or remembrance gathering.

Cultural values may also affect a person's:

Attitude toward death: Many Western cultures display death-denying traits. Death is often depicted as something to fight or resist. Eastern cultures, meanwhile, tend to characterize death to be a part of life. Death is often considered more of a transition than an end. Research suggests people in death-denying cultures tend to have more [anxiety](#) around death than people in death-accepting cultures.

Remembrance of the deceased: Some cultures, such as the Hopi or Achuar peoples, grieve by attempting to forget as much of the deceased as possible. It may be [taboo](#) for loved ones to say the person's name or to touch their belongings. Rituals are done to sever connections with the dead. Other cultures mourn by sharing memories of the deceased. People in the Akan region of Ghana often hold elaborate funerals which may cost a full year's income. The deceased are typically placed in "fantasy coffins" personalized with symbols of their life.

Margy Gibbons, a well-respected and experienced grief counsellor shared this insight regarding culture: "I've learnt that asking the direct question of the bereaved to explore how religion, rites and culture impact on their experience of loss and death is more helpful than thinking one knows about that person's culture."

Myths about grief

The notion that people move through fixed stages/phases of coping with loss is probably the most commonly believed myth. There is no sequential ordering, nor fixed timetable that governs beginning and end points. People do not simply recover and go back to "normal", rather they adapt, adjust and are to some degree changed forever.

Other myths include: every bereaved person shows distress and depression; the absence of grief indicates pathological or complicated grieving; recovery always occurs given time.

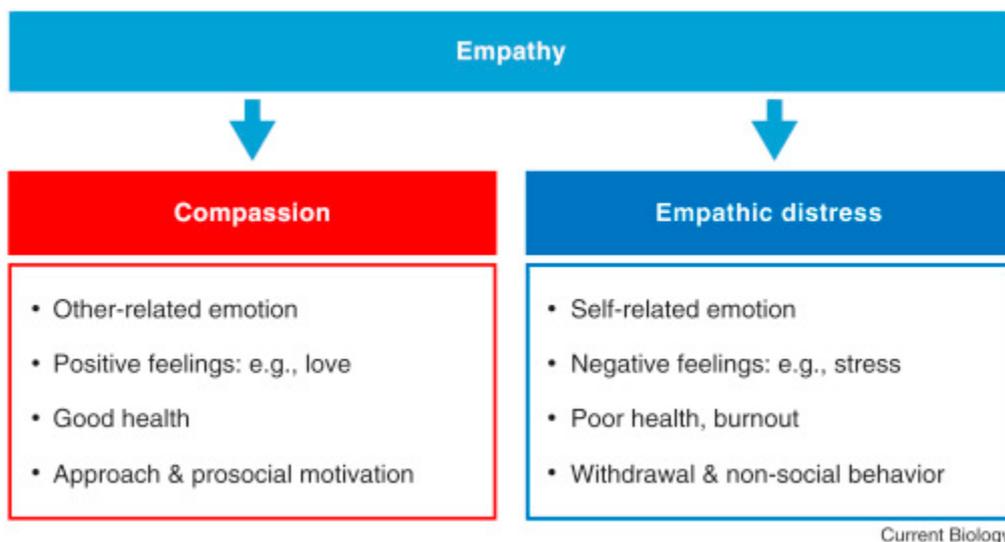
What can we then hope for as we grieve? A gradual acceptance, healing choices and honouring the person/s we have lost.

Supporting others in their time of pain

Managers and staff members: Be compassionate, NOT empathetic.

Avoid (and gently discourage) “pity parties.” Compassion more than empathy is particularly helpful. Empathy is the capacity to resonate with others positive/negative feelings alike, to walk in the shoes of the other person. A compassionate person, by definition, is motivated to take action that reduces another’s suffering, and this is emotionally beneficial to grievers. It is not the efficacy of the action that helps, but the willingness and genuine intention to help or support that is key. You cannot resolve other people’s grief for them, but you can find ways to support them while *they* address it.

Is empathy always useful (as we seem to be drained at times and then end up distancing ourselves from the grief as a protective reaction?) An empathic response to suffering can result in two kinds of reactions: 1) empathic distress, or 2) compassion, which is also referred to as empathic concern (below Table). For simplicity, let’s refer to empathic distress and compassion when speaking about these two different families of emotions.



Research has shown that empathic distress can have negative outcomes (self-orientated responses to the suffering of others, withdrawal to protect oneself from the stressor) whilst compassion has positive outcomes (other-orientated motivation to help that leads to addressing the suffering and initiating action). The good news is that compassion can be learnt, and has a positive impact on mood, and resilience in difficult situations.

To train social emotions like compassion, recent psychological research has increasingly made use of meditation-related techniques that foster feelings of benevolence and kindness. One of the most widely used techniques is called ‘loving kindness training’ (LKT). This form of mental practice is carried out in silence and relies on the cultivation of friendliness towards a series of

imagined persons. One would usually start the practice by visualizing a person one feels very close to and then gradually extend the feeling of kindness towards others, including strangers and, at a later stage, also people one has difficulties with. Ultimately, this practice aims at cultivating feelings of benevolence towards all human beings.

Using this kind of training, [Barbara Fredrickson](#) and collaborators have shown that several weeks of regular compassion training can have a beneficial impact on self-reported feelings of positive affect, personal resources, and well-being during everyday life. Interestingly, the beneficial effects of compassion training are not limited to the person who is training but can also benefit others.

Some additional compassion building ideas include:

- Cultivate self-compassion by addressing your own harsh inner critic.
- Check your intention by asking the classic Benjamin Franklin daily question: "What good shall I do this day?" At the end of the day review: "What good have I done today?"
- Practice mindfulness ([Calm](#), [Headspace](#) Apps and [STOP](#) technique).
- Form peer group spaces where you can decompress and learn effective coping techniques from each other.

The pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for certain interrelated leadership qualities: [awareness, vulnerability and compassion](#). We have long recognized the power of these characteristics, and forward-looking organizations are integrating them into leadership and client services programmes; you can begin cultivating them in a balanced way by first looking inward to understand your own emotions, your own sources of loss and grief, and then turning outward to help support others. I am currently working with a prominent asset manager client, that has a death claims section, to build empathy as a business capability, and ensure staff engagement and retention. Later this year I am going to approach some of our medical training institutions to provide upskilling in empathy, wish me luck.

Look for [simple ways](#) to help your team. Watch and listen more attentively for the emotional cues your colleagues are giving you and commit to not wasting opportunities to engage with them. Think of potential conversations which naturally lead to genuine expression of their feelings, a chance to connect and learn a bit more about what they are experiencing by asking: "How are you feeling, really?", and a compassionate offer to switch a few of the video meetings to phone calls or shorten meetings by ten minutes to provide time to reenergize.

Half a century ago, John Bowlby's, a pioneering psychiatrist in attachment theory, identified three states of mourning: one marked by defiance and anger; one by pain, despair, and disorganization; and one by slow reorganization and reinvestment in life. Bowlby cautioned

against assuming that these states unfold in a progression. Although popular misinterpretations of [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages](#) of grief paint the process as a steady march forward, researchers have confirmed Bowlby's belief that grief ebbs and flows. The initial, intense sorrow and debilitation usually reduce over the year following a loss, but grief does not then unfold in a neat, linear manner. Grievers will experience both progressions and regressions after a loss. That is why managers should understand the inherent fluidity within the [three states](#) and the most helpful response to each. Much like water has the capacity to transition between being frozen, steam and a fluid; so do people have the capacity to move between these grief states.

The void state: Be present.

In the immediate aftermath of the loss, or at any point in which grief flares up acutely, acknowledging the loss without making demands is the best a manager can do. Let the griever take the lead. It is important to ignore the impulse to "fix" that drives most managerial actions. Death is unfixable. Instead, managers and colleagues should be present and support employees by managing the boundary between them and the workplace. Close colleagues typically will reach out to grieving co-workers, but it is especially important that a manager does too. Managers represent the organization, and their demonstration of support is a signal that the workplace cares. Bereavement is one of the most powerfully memorable experiences a manager and an employee can share.

A manager's presence, through a phone call and, if welcome, a personal visit, goes a long way toward reassuring employees that they are valued and supported. Show that you recognize the loss they have experienced and find out what they would like you to tell others at work. Sending flowers or a card is a thoughtful gesture, and you might also inquire whether your presence at the memorial service would be appreciated. Do not hesitate to be open with the bereaved about what the policy is for returning to work and whether it might be flexible and assure them that colleagues will be glad to see them when they do return. While some managers might find it awkward to discuss an employee's return to work in the immediate aftermath of death, the bereaved often long for clarity. At a moment in which life feels like a maelstrom, work can be a life-raft of familiar structure and choice.

There is no formula or agreed-upon recommendation for when to return to work. What must be avoided is when the griever is treated like a machine. What is more, people process grief differently. Individuals' responses differ with the kind of loss they have experienced, how close they were to the person and the nature of the death itself. These factors should be considered when agreeing on time off, especially in organizations without a formal policy. Some long to get back to work as a respite from grieving, as a reminder that there is one part of life where they still have some control. Others may need more time, for practical reasons or because they are more

overwhelmed by their grief. Some employees may want to bring some of their grief to work, hoping that others will acknowledge it. In recent years, Facebook and Mastercard have increased their policy to provide up to 20 days for the loss of an immediate family member. Companies might consider leave-sharing schemes that allow employees to donate vacation time to those in need. These policies are common at many organizations, including Accenture, the National Institutes of Health. Another possibility is an employee assistance fund (to which co-workers may make contributions that are matched by the company) to help workers cover funeral or other expenses. Managers whose teams include full-time employees working alongside subcontractors, consultants, or freelancers should be mindful that the benefits available to the former will most likely not extend to the latter and could surface or exacerbate feelings of resentment.

And when the employee is ready to return to work, managers play an important role in preparing co-workers, through communication about the returning employee's wishes and perhaps an expert-facilitated workshop on how to deal with grief. Managers should ask bereaved employees what they want and need: "How would you like your colleagues to respond? Do you want to come in for an hour or two and see everybody, so your return is not too overwhelming? Would it be helpful to work half time for a couple of weeks?" Empower grieving employees to choose, and respect their choices, and if they are not sure what would be best, give them some time.

It can be hard to know how to support a friend, work colleague or employee who is grieving. The key is to just be present and recognise that grieving is a gradual process. Be flexible and open to their unique way of grieving. If you are uncertain of what to say and do, consider the following:

Name names-do not be afraid to mention the deceased. It will not make the griever any sadder, although it may prompt tears. Saying how much you will miss a person is better than the standard: "I am sorry for your loss." By acknowledging death instead of hiding behind empty euphemisms like: "loss, better place, passed on," you show that you are open to talk about how the grieving person really feels.

Just be: listen instead of advising, avoid judgements. Acknowledge their difficult days, handle anger gently and keep coming back. Never truer is: "A friend in need, is a friend indeed."

Do not ask: "How are you?". The answer is obvious, not good, and is so generic it under plays the devastating loss. Instead try: "How are you feeling today?" and be ready to really listen.

Reach-out: call to express your sympathies but avoid such phrases like: "It is Gods will/plan", or "It's for the best" unless the bereaved person says it first. Diarise and check in every now and then, especially after the first couple weeks when others stop calling e.g. "I am thinking of you,

we love you." Call just to talk. Offer a real hug. Include them in everyday activities like movies, dinners etc. Share remembrance items.

Help-out: assist (ask first) in specific ways like with meals, cleaning the house, looking after the kids, taking pets for a walk, sleep over if they feel lonely, provide self-care packages, drive them places and really keep your promises to be there. One griever noted: "Death is the ultimate disappointment in a sense, and grieving people have a low capacity for more disappointment whilst simultaneously feeling highly vulnerable." Weekends and holidays can be especially difficult. Suggest low stress activities like walk in nature or a quiet meal together.

My friend who lost her husband tragically had this observation: "I noticed that many people were scared to approach me or send a message because they simply didn't know what to say. And then they would placate their fears by telling themselves that I probably have others supporting me and if everyone does this, there is of course no support. So, suck up the courage and send the message!!"

The absence state: Be patient.

Grief typically remains intense for months and can flare up years later. So even when grievers return to work, and it has been managed compassionately, managers cannot assume that everything will just go back to normal. The person in mourning will continue to be in the grip of intense confusion, exhaustion, and pain. Furthermore, the months that follow the initial shock of loss are often a time of ambivalence. They go back and forth between feeling pain and wanting to move on. Since ambivalence is not always conscious, let alone easy to express, it often manifests as inconsistency.

It is easy, during such oscillations, to feel that the griever has "lost it." We want to return to normal, to be who we were before, but we feel that it might not be possible. It is important for managers to realize that grief destabilizes focus, consistency, and drive, the very things we value in engaged employees. Inconsistency is normal for some time after a loss, as is a lack of appetite for challenges and change. Neither is a sign that an employee has become permanently disengaged. Recognizing and managing these behaviours can avert a good deal of misunderstanding and conflict.

People can be very self-critical when they are grieving. Especially those who have been very successful at work and find that working harder does little to decrease the pain of loss. Managers, need to be human centred, not output obsessed, knowing that in time delivery will probably rectify and their compassion in these dark times will build a deep loyalty far exceeding any short-term productivity losses.

Institutionally, the policies that help in this phase are those that offer flexibility. Managers might assign people to tasks that are more likely to reinforce their agency or that support their need to tend to other parts of their lives. Managers might allow remote working or flexible work hours for a period, more lenient performance management along with regular reviews to discuss how the employee is coping and whether further accommodation is needed. Flexibility helps people benefit from the structure of returning to work without being overwhelmed. If an employee continues to struggle several months after a loss, a manager might gently suggest that he or she could benefit from consulting a mental healthcare professional. Many companies' employee assistance programs include funding for short-term counselling that can provide valuable support through the early stages of grief. But do not jump into this straight away, let them process the pain for themselves for a while...Margy Gibbons uses the analogy of a butterfly and a cocoon. "Grief work to me is well described in that metaphor. Too much help from a concerned other to the bereaved, does not give the full opportunity for the bereaved person to work through all of the grief and emerge stronger, more resilient."

The new beginning state: Be open.

Plenty of studies and stories document the generative effects of confronting mortality over time with the patient and steady support and caring of others. "A brush with death can lead to a new life," wrote Sheryl Sandberg (COO of Facebook) and Adam Grant, echoing Viktor Frankl's classic work, [Man's Search for Meaning](#). Referred to as "post-traumatic growth," these effects include a newfound appreciation of life, a more resilient hope, deeper connections with others, and a resolve to make the most of what one has. Post-traumatic growth does not replace the devastating feelings of loss or the need to grieve. Rather, it reinforces the realization that one has survived, and that life is worth living. Whether it involves being more authentic and focused on one's work, writing a book to break the taboo surrounding loss, or spending more time with family, such growth does not mean forgetting or returning to what was. It involves living fully with the loss.

There is no timeline for the emergence of hope and resolve after loss, but when signs of them appear, managers can nurture them through affirmation and a gentle interest in what employees might be discovering about their attitudes to life and work. This is especially true in the early stages of this phase when the person might feel some guilt about these new ways of feeling and seeing life. The most helpful managers are NOT those who captivate employees with a hopeful vision of the future, but rather those who listen and support them as they craft a new way forward ([Purpose](#)), carving out space for meaning making in the present ([mindfulness](#)).

Authentic and vulnerable leadership can be helpful in certain situations. People facing similar struggles will see this openness as permission to speak about them in the workplace. In doing so

we overcome the conspiracy of silence, and we reconnect on a deeper level. Research presented in Monica Worline and Jane Dutton's book [Awakening Compassion at Work](#) showed that compassion correlates with your own level of job satisfaction and the degree to which you find your work meaningful.

Not every manager, of course, will have had a major experience of loss to turn to. Even if you have not yet been touched by bereavement, you are likely to have endured painful struggles and can draw on those. Or you can simply pay attention to the shifts in attitude and focus of bereaved employees, and gently inquire about them. "Over the past few months, I've noticed that you seem more interested in..." is often a good start. Given space and permission, people can begin to act on their longing for deeper relationships, real conversations, and meaningful work. And given support, they may over time muster the courage to talk openly about how they have grown through loss. Finally, remember it is not about you as the manager (auto-biographical responding), it is all about the griever; but in sharing we create the space for people to feel comfortable to open up and re-connect.

Compassionate organisational norms when employees die

The death of an employee can be particularly challenging for managers as there is a feeling of collective loss which will affect many in the organization, all at once. A failure by managers to acknowledge and respond to the grief can have significant repercussions. Not least of all, they reveal the organisations true culture.

The most [powerful organizational responses](#) acknowledge the shared nature of the grief and allow bereaved employees to connect with one another. To begin, managers should facilitate informal conversations with team members about the death, acknowledging that work may be disrupted, and encouraging people to speak openly about their feelings. More formally, managers may offer collective rituals, by holding a gathering where employees come together to share memories and feelings, establishing a quiet space where grievers may sit and reflect, or organizing a celebration of the employee's life. Online platforms that allow the sharing of tributes, stories, and photographs are especially useful when workers are geographically dispersed/socially distancing. It may be appropriate to offer employees time off immediately after a co-worker's unexpected death, to allow them to process what has happened in the way that feels best for each individual. The impact of compassionate leadership at a time of collective loss goes beyond the employees most immediately affected.

Self-care when we are the grievers

Grief can be a difficult emotion for people raised on a diet of positivity happiness. There are no definitive stages of grief and we will respond differently but we can still take some concrete, simple healthy actions...

[Tend to the essentials](#). Establish a daily routine based on healthy choices: regular sleep and exercise patterns, eating well, taking necessary medication. Avoid risky behaviours, and delay big decisions (where possible) till you have clear perspective. If you do need to make big decisions seek wise counsel from those you trust, especially people that don't have a vested interest in the outcome or whom can be totally objective. See your health care professional, especially a mental one, whilst giving yourself permission to grieve and do something uplifting for yourself every day. Keep track of your small wins by writing them up on a wall calendar.

According to Professor William Worden (Harvard Medical School and the Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology in California) there are four tasks of healthy grieving. Worden does not believe grief is a passive progression of stages that a person is carried through. Rather, Worden empowers mourners to actively engage with four tasks. When faced with a loss, you are forced to make a choice between two alternatives. You can wallow in despair over what you have lost, wishing what has changed had never changed. Or you can engage with grief, which allows you to *adapt* and keep moving forward. Worden believes the latter is a healthier approach to grief, by allowing mourners to accept the loss and adapt to life after loss. The four tasks of grieving are:

1. Accept the Reality of the Loss. Some denial can serve a purpose in that it allows you to slowly absorb the full weight of the loss. However, remaining or idling in denial is the antithesis of acceptance. You must confront your own *denial* and accept that the loss has occurred. Acceptance is the surrendering to reality as it is. Your loved one died. Your company passed over you for that position. Your partner said no to your marriage proposal. You cannot make loss disappear through denial. Acceptance is the first step towards adapting and moving forward.

2. Experience the Pain of Grief. For whatever reason, we are afraid to feel in our culture. We take pills, distract ourselves with entertainment, and generally avoid discomfort, but this is not helping us. *Avoidance* compounds our pain. You must experience the pain of what you have lost. Allow the emotion into your consciousness and take proper steps to process the feelings. You can process with a trusted friend, mentor, family member, mental healthcare specialist. Yet, there are many ways to process emotion outside of words. If writing a song, painting a

picture, or making a video is your thing, then, do what works. Feelings of grief and pain are natural. What is not healthy is suppressing those emotions.

3. Adjust to an Environment With the "Deceased" Missing. Life is not the same now that the loss has occurred. You may feel like adjusting to life without your loved one is a betrayal of your loved one, that pursuing another goal is a betrayal of your dream, or that getting closer with a new friend is a betrayal of your friend who moved away. This kind of reasoning can leave people *stuck*. You must adjust and adapt to the new normal, which entails reorienting and restructuring what you do without your loved one in the picture.

4. Find an Enduring Connection with the "Deceased" While Embarking on a New Life. Even though that part of you is irretrievably gone because of the loss, what was is still part of who you are. The joy and warmth you experienced from your deceased loved one will always be with you. Try to think of the time you had with them as a gift. Rather than focus on what you lost, put your attention on what you received from your loved one. When dreams die, there can be blessings and curses. With the passing of your dream comes realizations of other passions. So, start out on a new life, but keep with you those cherished moments and memories as a source of joy and strength. Experience is what you get, when you do not get what you want.

Regaining perspective when you simply cannot see a way forward

Quite understandably when we are grieving we can lose perspective, but by viewing our grief through the [3 lenses of time](#) we can regain the necessary clarity and growth, despite the pain.

- **Past:** commemorate the person/loss through expressing [gratitude](#). Create a scrapbook; Facebook page, memory box, slide show, photo-wall, artwork, good cause in their name, peaceful spot bench, a garden, gravesite, prayer, or partake in an activity they loved to do with family, friends, or colleagues.
- **Present:** centre ourselves through mindfulness and journaling. By engaging regularly in [mindfulness](#) we build heightened metacognitive awareness, improved working memory, lower levels of anxiety and stress, better physical pain management. All challenges that grievers often feel acutely.
- **Future:** Post Traumatic Growth helps us define the meaning we attach to events, lessons learnt that we could take into our future. (This last tool should not be rushed into after loss, and rather when the time is right the griever can embark on this journey).

Post-traumatic growth can also happen to [groups and communities](#). When a crisis occurs in a community (such as a war or a natural disaster), people often react by becoming more interconnected. They become friendlier, more cooperative, and altruistic. People feel a

common sense of purpose, and a spirit of cooperation begins to replace normal competitiveness. For the community, this often equates to a kind of post-traumatic growth. The whole community shifts into a higher level of integration. It is as if, rather than existing as isolated individuals, people fuse together into a whole. In these situations, people develop communal coping strategies and had more collective gatherings. This does not always happen of course. Sometimes crises can have the opposite effect, and lead to a kind of post-traumatic stress, in which social bonds fall away and people become more selfish and individualistic. Only time will tell what COVID-19 has left as a legacy. People working in/or with organisations should consciously steer the organisation towards community, towards opportunities that foster bonds, especially given the challenges of working from home.

Resources for grievers: you do not need to walk alone

Grieving can feel both incredibly lonely and unique to the griever. The reality is that as painful as their experiences are, others have probably been through similar journeys and the griever can leverage off these hard-gained insights. This is not a definitive list, but rather some well-regarded sources to contemplate...

Web help:

[GriefNet](#): they have over [50 e-mail grief support groups](#) and two web sites. Their integrated approach to on-line grief support provides help to people working through loss and grief issues of many kinds.

[Whatsyourgrief.com](#): they promote grief education, exploration, and expression in both practical and creative ways for grievers, supporters of grievers and grief counsellors. They provide: Resources related to understanding and coping with grief and loss. Guidance on how to help a grieving friend or family member. Online courses about grief and supporting someone who is grieving. Resources, education, and training for grief counsellors, grief volunteers, and other professionals working in fields related to grief and loss. A podcast about grief and a supportive community.

[Grief.com](#): Through education, information, and other helpful resources they hope to make the challenging road of grief a little easier. David Kessler, the site owner, has authored six books, including [Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief](#). Two of which he co-authored with Elisabeth Kubler Ross.

Organisations:

[SADAG](#): the South African Depression and Anxiety Group is Africa's largest mental health support and advocacy group. They provide comprehensive mental health information and resources for you, family members and loved ones. In addition, they provide training.

[Lifeline](#): They provide a 24-hour telephonic service that can assist the public with psychological and social stresses and trauma that they are struggling to deal with. For example, bereavement, depression, loneliness, family problems, trauma, pregnancy, HIV infection, sexual and gender violence, substance abuse, or any other situation where a person is struggling to cope with life, in general.

[Hospice Palliative Care Association](#): promotes quality in life, dignity in death and support in bereavement for all living with a life-threatening illness by supporting member hospices and partner organisations.

Podcasts:

[Terrible, thanks for asking](#) consists of a series interviews with people who have experienced different types of loss, including death of a loved one.

Book for the public:

[Overcoming Grief](#): a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques by Sue Morris (clinical psychologist). This practical guide will help you to regain a sense of control and offers tried and tested strategies for adjusting to life without your spouse, friend, or family member.

Books for grief counselling professionals:

[Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life, Fourth Edition by Colin Parkes and Holly Prigerson](#)

This book recognises that there is no single solution to the problems of bereavement but that an understanding of grief can help the bereaved to realise that they are not alone in their experience. *Bereavement* provides guidance on preparing for the loss of a loved one and coping after they have gone. It also discusses how to identify the minority in whom bereavement may lead to impairment of physical and/or mental health and how to ensure they get the help they need. This text can be of value to the bereaved themselves, as well as the professionals and friends who seek to help and understand them. Parkes and Prigerson include additional information about the different circumstances of bereavement including traumatic losses, disasters, and complicated grief, as well as providing details on how social, religious, and cultural influences determine how we grieve.

[Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: J. William Worden](#): This fourth edition covers: Attachment, loss, and the experience of grief. Understanding the mourning process. The mourning process: mediators of mourning. Grief counselling: facilitating uncomplicated grief. Abnormal grief reactions: Complicated mourning. Grief therapy: resolving complicated mourning. Grieving special types of losses. Grief and family systems. The counsellor's own grief. Training for grief counselling.

[The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life by Bonanno, GA \(2009\).](#) George Bonanno argues that this process discounts our universal ability to be resilient, and does not allow for exceptions, which ultimately does a disservice to those in need. Weaving in explorations of Chinese mourning rituals, case studies from families who lost a loved one during 9/11, and more.

In conclusion

I want to close with a poem by [Charity Smith](#): *"We grieve that which we perceive and misperceive; that which we fear and that which we cling to; that which we love and that which brings us harm. Every change a loss, no matter how great the gain, and still, we grieve.*

We grieve babies, grown and ungrown; youth, ours and others; the aged, and our elders. We grieve for those we have never known and for those who knew us before we ever were.

We grieve the near-misses, the dodged-bullets, the what-ifs, the shouldn't-have-beens, the wouldn't-have-beens, the "I-know-betters," and the fateful outcomes. We grieve almos. We grieve maybes. We grieve that which we deny, even to ourselves.

And from this, we grow. We grow in the spaces left behind, in the possibilities left unfulfilled, left open, offered up, handed over, and passed down. We rise from the soil where the dust settles.

We change. We move forward. And we grieve."

