

Grief in the workplace by Cindy Illig Lum
Lake County Business Journal – April 2008

In “The Grief Index: The Hidden Annual Cost of Grief in America’s Workplace,” the Grief Recovery Institute in California revealed that the death of a loved one costs businesses \$37.5 billion annually. Add another \$7 billion for the deaths of close friends, colleagues and extended family members.

The effects of grief can be debilitating not only on loved ones but on their employers. Consider that 85 percent of management-level decision-makers said their decisions were adversely affected in the weeks or months following the grief incident. Of those, 60 percent indicated that *some* of their decisions had a negative financial impact on their company.

Among blue-collar workers, 90 percent said they had a much higher incidence of physical injuries because of reduced concentration in the weeks or months following a grief incident.

Poor decision-making, decreased productivity and a lack of concentration can translate into accidents, injuries and the loss of customers. In the long term, grief can result in drug or alcohol abuse and depression, all of which will affect job performance. All of these can seriously affect a company’s bottom line, according to the report.

Show support, cut costs

For those employers who want to show support for grieving employees and avoid some of the costs of bereavement, Diane Snyder Cowan, the director of the Bereavement Center of Hospice of the Western Reserve in Cleveland, offers some help.

“The right thing to do is to come up with ways to accommodate the grieving employee, whether that means a flexible schedule or shifting workload,” Cowan said.

As an example, she offers the time when her own administrative assistant’s father died.

“She was the person who answered the phone when people called looking for grief counseling,” Cowan said.

Knowing these types of calls would trigger her assistant’s grief, Cowan made arrangements to divert the phone duties to another employee.

As for the wrong way to respond, Cowan advises employers not to expect things to get back to normal when the funeral is over.

“When someone comes to work after someone they love dies, they can make mistakes and have accidents,” Cowan said.

Yet coming back to work is often the best thing for a grieving employee.

“The workplace is often a second home,” Cowan said. “If something triggers a reaction at work, employers can be supportive by providing a private spot to reflect or time to take a walk around the parking lot.”

To help employers, the Bereavement Center provides the “Lunch and Learn Program,” an educational workshop that can be tailored to the needs of the employer. In addition to education, the Bereavement Center can provide grief response training for supervisors, onsite support groups, assistance with policy development or even a team of support people who can respond to a crisis.

“Employers need to know that grief is affecting their bottom line,” Cowan said. “You have a responsibility to your workers and to the company to provide support and services so they can work successfully.”

More companies are taking advantage of the Bereavement Center’s services according to Cowan.

“As the average age of employees’ increases, grief in the workplace is becoming more and more common.”

Help for the grieving

When Kelly McBride lost her 22-year-old sister Shannon after complications following a tonsillectomy, she returned to work and hoped for the best.

“One of the biggest issues I faced was I had to show up for work and maintain social appearances while inside my heart had stopped beating,” McBride said. “I wanted other people to be gentle with me.”

Instead, McBride felt that most people expected her to be done grieving after the funeral. She was often isolated and embarrassed when people seemed shocked that she wasn’t over her sister’s death. So,

along with her sister Michele, she embarked on a search for validation. Unable to find what they needed, the two sisters started their own company.

Luna's Light produces and sells the unique gifts and cards the McBride's wished they would have received. Most poignant among them is what the sisters have trademarked as the universal grieving symbol. In the form of a pin, the symbol can be worn to alert colleagues or just about anyone that the wearer is feeling a loss and having a difficult day.

"It is a symbol that other people will recognize without saying a word," McBride said. "When you see someone wearing the pin, ask how they are doing, offer to take some work off their hands."

As for how an employer can help a grieving employee, McBride offers this advice.

"I would advocate that employers acknowledge that somebody has died and that it might affect each person differently," she said. "I would encourage the management team to get involved in that person's life and ask what they can do."

Cindy Illig Lum is a Madison Township freelance writer.

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