

Grieve and Stay Well

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For those of you who have experienced a significant loss, or worked with a colleague who has, hearing encouragements to wellness can feel like an unattainable burden. Being invited to “get away” for our optimal well-being, we’ve all seen the glossy magazine pictures of smiling, vibrant faces situated at dazzling, exotic retreat locales. Doing well in such a setting seems both inspiring and effortless, leaving the impression that with such opportunities we could finally reach a place of wholeness. If wellness means easygoing lifestyle choices which continuously yield blissful experiences and peak productivity, then it’s hard to see how the experience of grief relates to such an ideal.

Grief can challenge our efforts at consistency, diminish our energy for doing things and overwhelm our experiences with difficult feelings. It seems miles away from popular images of wellness. And yet, grief is a natural part of the human journey and has been from our earliest beginnings. Because we care deeply for the people around us, grief is the form which love takes when we lose someone significant in our lives. Is there a way to reconcile grief and wellness by enlarging our sense of what it means to be well so that it takes account of the grief experience? It would surely mean that wellness is less about striving for happiness and wholeness and more about coping with what life brings us, more about finding good ways to bear the feelings of sadness and incompleteness after a loss.

In order to enlarge our understanding of wellness and make it more humanly realistic, we might recognize the importance of

“vital coping”. Such an idea would include the many ways we find our bearings and take care of ourselves after a loss. To fill out this idea, consider some of the following elements. When Montgomery Hospice bereavement counselors are talking with individuals who have recently experienced a loss, one of the early questions they often ask is about that person’s eating and sleeping. These are two of the most frequently interrupted parts of someone’s life at such a time and an important focus for coping. Another place of change is often a grieving person’s energy level, which can be diminished during grief, and requires that a person find helpful ways of getting rest and managing reduced energy. Recognizing that we carry our grief in our bodies, it is important to attend to the kinds of self-care and exercise a grieving person is considering. Far from being an additional burden on an already weary body, this kind of care can take many soothing and enlivening forms: getting a massage, going for a gentle walk, taking a yoga class, meeting friends around a hobby, and on and on.

Another element of vital coping is finding the appropriate rhythm for social involvement. Grieving individuals need to find their balance between going and doing and being with the others, on the one hand, and allowing for low-key times just to themselves, on the other. This will be

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different for each person, and may change for someone over time, but it is an important part of coping with social connections while grieving. In addition, vital coping involves sorting out the meanings of a life after a loss. When a loved one dies, a person’s assumed world is abruptly challenged and changed, as one person shared after the long-term care and death of her mother, “I’ve thought of myself as my mother’s daughter and caregiver for a long time, so who am I going to be now?” Such questions revolving around the meaning of a loss and how one adapts to a changed world are intimate, often intense, and subtly important. Taking time to allow these questions to be sorted out is essential. Although each person’s grief reactions are different, all these elements of vital coping help to enrich our sense of what well-being might mean by including the ways we deal with our losses. Given the importance of such coping, what are the implications for

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the places we work and the co-workers around us? We all have experienced or will experience the loss of a loved one, so it is important to establish a workplace where attention to wellness includes supportive measures which allow for “vital coping.” Since the 2003 study, *Grief Index: The ‘Hidden’ Annual Costs of Grief in America’s Workplace*, there has been increasing recognition of the ways in which grief can affect the workplace, from higher absences to mistakes on the job to decreased energy and focus. It would serve both individuals and companies well to offer a supportive work environment where grieving persons are compassionately upheld as part of a larger emphasis on wellness.

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I offer the following suggestions as possible ways to offer support, while recognizing that each company and individual will work out such measures in unique ways.

For grieving individuals and co-workers:

- After a loss, communicate with your supervisor about how public you want the loss to be. Because each person is different, some are comforted by the fact that all of their co-workers know, some tell only a few around them, and some prefer that as few as possible are aware.
- For co-workers, gently find out when and if the grieving person wants to talk about their grief. Be non-intrusive and willing to listen without judgment. Recognize that

for some, it is enough just to be at work and have a “regular” day without talking about the loss.

- Another low key way to acknowledge a co-worker’s loss is to send a thoughtful card or make a donation in their loved one’s memory.
- Don’t overreact or create unnecessary attention if a grieving colleague has a tearful moment, even many months after the loss. Emotional triggers can come at any time and do not mean that something is wrong. Sometimes, it is best to offer a tissue with some kind words, such as “this must be a tender place for you,” or “take your time, I’ll be here,” or even “would you like to step away and take a break?”
- Use your desk or workspace for pictures or mementos of loved ones. Those who grieve can often find comfort in small tokens of connection to their loved one and take comfort in sharing them with caring colleagues.
- For co-workers, make a note to remember those who have lost a loved one as time goes by, especially around big days such as holidays, anniversaries and birthdays.
- For those who grieve and those who care about them, be patient and gentle with yourself and others. Grief can be a lot of ups and downs, so be kind in the process.

For supervisors and companies:

- Provide for bereavement leave. Such a gesture signals that the company recognizes something significant has happened, and that it wants to help.
- Offer counseling support through resources provided by HR, the Employee Assistance Program or Peer Support meetings.

- Offer additional outside counseling, paid or unpaid, with referral lists of counselors and therapists.
- Create an employee leave bank where staff can donate extra hours to be used by grieving individuals when needed.
- Offer flex time to employees to work at home when they feel unable to match the typical office energy and challenges.
- If possible, reassign grieving employees away from certain projects or situations which might trigger grief episodes or complications.
- Allow for staff to take some time for getting out and walking during lunch or a break. Provide schedule flexibility during the day for staff who’d like to go to the gym.
- If possible provide an inviting space for reflective moments. Install an outside bench; plant a small garden; create a comfortable room away from the usual workspace.
- Communicate clearly with grieving persons about the supports available as well as the expectations. Work out a plan together for employee needs and return to work.
- Offer an annual ritual of remembrance for staff, allowing them to pause and acknowledge their losses from the past year.
- Schedule grief awareness education for managers, leadership, and staff.

No one company or person will do all of this perfectly, but such policies and gestures provide a direction for innovative approaches to wellness in the workplace and beyond. Let’s move past the popular images of well-being in our society toward something more human and real, where grief and wellness go hand in hand.

