

Toolbox Talk

Grief & Loss



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers understand how grief can affect people differently, recognise how loss may affect concentration, behaviour and working life and feel more confident supporting a workmate without feeling they need to fix what they're going through.

One of the difficult things about grief is that life carries on even when yours feels like it's stopped. Someone can lose a parent, partner, family member, friend, colleague or pet and a few days later, the alarm is still going off in the morning. The bills still need paying, the kids still need looking after and the site still opens at 7:30. You can be standing there in your hi-vis, surrounded by people getting on with the job, while your head is somewhere completely different and because grief isn't something we can see, everyone around you might assume you're doing alright simply because you've turned up for work.

Why It Matters

There isn't one correct way to grieve. Some people cry. Some people become quiet. Others throw themselves into work because keeping busy feels easier than sitting at home thinking about what's happened. Someone might seem completely fine for weeks and then suddenly struggle months later. Grief can also be unpredictable. You might feel alright in the morning and then hear a song on the radio, see an old photo or realise an anniversary is approaching and suddenly everything comes back. Birthdays, Christmas, Father's Day, Mother's Day or the anniversary of someone's death can all bring feelings back when you weren't expecting them. That matters in construction because our work often requires concentration. We're driving, using tools, working around machinery, following instructions and making decisions that can affect ourselves and other people. If your mind keeps drifting back to what's happened, it can become harder to focus on the task in front of you. Coming back to work doesn't necessarily mean someone has finished grieving. Sometimes they've simply decided they're ready to try getting back into a routine.



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Signs To Look Out For

Grief can affect people emotionally, physically and practically. You might find yourself struggling to concentrate, forgetting things you would normally remember or reading the same information several times before it sinks in. Sleep can become difficult, leaving you exhausted before the working day has even started. Some people become quieter and want more time on their own. Others become more irritable or impatient. You might feel guilty about laughing or enjoying yourself because you think you shouldn't be feeling alright yet. Equally, you might feel nothing at all for a while and wonder why you're not reacting in the way you expected. You may notice these changes in a colleague too. Someone might seem distracted, tired, withdrawn or simply not quite themselves after returning to work. They might want to talk about the person they've lost or they might not want to talk about it at all. Neither response is wrong. Grief is personal and people deal with it in different ways.

What Can Help

If you're grieving, try not to put pressure on yourself to return to normal immediately. There isn't a timetable for this. Some days might feel easier than others and having a difficult day after several good ones doesn't mean you've gone backwards. At work, be honest if your concentration isn't where it normally is, particularly before doing something safety-critical. You don't necessarily have to explain every detail. Sometimes simply saying, "My head's not quite there today," gives a supervisor or workmate the chance to understand and make sure you're not carrying something alone while trying to do a difficult task.

Give yourself permission to talk about the person you've lost, if you want to. Sometimes telling a story, talking about a memory or simply saying their name can be helpful. Other times you might not want to discuss it at all. Both are completely understandable.



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If you're supporting someone who is grieving, don't worry about finding the perfect words. You don't need to make things better because you probably can't. Something as simple as, "I'm sorry mate. If you need anything, I'm here," is enough. Then continue checking in. Lots of people receive support immediately after someone dies but a few weeks later the messages stop while the grief is still very much there. Try not to avoid someone because you're worried about saying the wrong thing and don't assume they want to forget about it. If they mention the person they've lost, listen. You don't have to give advice or compare it with your own experiences unless they ask. Finally, if grief is becoming overwhelming, affecting everyday life for a long period or you simply feel like you need some extra support, speak to someone you trust, your GP, a counsellor or another support service. You don't have to reach a certain level of struggle before you're allowed to ask for help.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think people can react so differently after losing someone?
- How might grief affect somebody's concentration or behaviour at work?
- What's a simple way we can support a colleague who's experienced a loss without putting pressure on them to talk?

Takeaway Message

Grief doesn't follow a timetable and it doesn't disappear just because someone has returned to work. People can have good days, difficult days and days where something catches them completely by surprise. If you're grieving, give yourself some patience and speak up if you're struggling. If someone around you has experienced a loss, you don't need to fix anything. Sometimes being there, listening and continuing to check in is enough.



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Action

If you know someone who's lost somebody recently, check in with them this week. Don't worry about having the perfect thing to say. A simple, "How are you getting on?" can open the door if they want to talk and remember to check in again later. Support often matters just as much several months down the line as it does in the first few days.



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